

Part I. The Facts

1. An Important Passenger on the Taurus Express

It was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping-car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform conversing, with a small man muffled up to the ears of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward-curved moustache.

It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubose performed his part manfully. Graceful phrases fell from his lips in polished French. Not that he knew what it was all about. There had been rumours, of course, as there always were in such cases. The General's - his General's - temper had grown worse and worse. And then there had come this Belgian stranger - all the way from England, it seemed. There had been a week - a week of curious tenseness. And then certain things had happened. A very distinguished officer had committed suicide, another had suddenly resigned, anxious faces had suddenly lost their anxiety, certain military precautions were relaxed. And the General, Lieutenant Dubose's own particular General, had suddenly looked ten years younger. Dubose had overheard part of a conversation between him and the stranger.

"You have saved us, mon cher," said the General emotionally, his great white moustache trembling as he spoke. "You have saved the honour of the French Army - you have averted much bloodshed! How can I thank you for acceding to my request? To have come so far-" To which the stranger (by name M. Hercule Poirot) had made a fitting reply including the phrase - "But indeed, do I not remember that once you saved my life?" And then the General had made another fitting reply to that, disclaiming any merit for that past service; and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of

honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily and the conversation had ended.

As to what it had all been about, Lieutenant Dubose was still in the dark, but to him had been delegated the duty of seeing off M. Poirot by the Taurus Express, and he was carrying it out with all the zeal and ardour befitting a young officer with a promising career ahead of him.

"To-day is Sunday," said Lieutenant Dubose. "Tomorrow, Monday evening, you will be in Stamboul." It was not the first time he had made this observation. Conversations on the platform, before the departure of a train, are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character. "That is so," agreed M. Poirot. "And you intend to remain there a few days, I think?"

"Mais oui. Stamboul, it is a city I have never visited. It would be a pity to pass through - comme ^a." He snapped his fingers descriptively. "Nothing presses - I shall remain there as a tourist for a few days."

"La Sainte Sophie, it is very fine," said Lieutenant Dubose, who had never seen it.

A cold wind came whistling down the platform. Both men shivered. Lieutenant Dubose managed to cast a surreptitious glance at his watch. Five minutes to five - only five minutes more! Fancying that the other man had noticed his glance, he hastened once more into speech. "There are few people travelling this time of year," he said, glancing up at the windows of the sleeping-car above them. "That is so," agreed M. Poirot.

"Let us hope you will not be snowed up in the Taurus!"

"That happens?"

"It has occurred, yes. Not this year, as yet." "Let us hope, then," said M. Poirot. "The weather reports from Europe, they are bad. "Very bad. In the Balkans there is much snow."

"In Germany, too, I have heard." "Eh bien," said Lieutenant Dubose hastily as another pause seemed to be about to occur. "Tomorrow evening at seven-forty you will be in Constantinople."

"Yes," said M. Poirot, and went on desperately, "La Sainte Sophie, I have heard it is very fine."

"Magnificent, I believe."

Above their heads the blinds of one of the sleeping-car compartments was pushed aside and a young woman looked out. Mary Debenham had had little sleep since she left Baghdad on the preceding Thursday. Neither in the train to Kirkuk, nor in the Rest House at Mosul, nor last night on the train had she slept properly. Now, weary of lying wakeful in the hot stuffiness of her overheated compartment, she got up and peered out. This must be Aleppo. Nothing to see, of course. Just a long, poorly lighted platform with loud, furious altercations in Arabic going on somewhere. Two men below her window were talking French. One was a French officer, the other was a little man with enormous moustaches. She smiled faintly. She had never seen anyone quite so heavily muffled up. It must be very cold outside. That was why they heated the train so terribly. She tried to force the window down lower, but it would not go.

The Wagon Lit conductor had come up to the two men. The train was about to depart, he said. Monsieur had better mount. The little man removed his hat. What an egg-shaped head he had! In spite of her preoccupations Mary Debenham smiled. A ridiculous-looking little man. The sort of little man one could never take seriously.

Lieutenant Dubose was saying his parting speech. He had thought it out beforehand and had kept it till the last minute. It was a very beautiful, polished speech. Not to be outdone, M. Poirot replied in kind... "En voiture, Monsieur," said the Wagon Lit conductor. With an air of infinite reluctance M. Poirot climbed aboard the train. The conductor climbed after him.

M. Poirot waved his hand. Lieutenant Dubose came to the salute. The train, with a terrific jerk, moved slowly forward. "Enfin!" murmured M. Hercule Poirot. "Brrrrrrrr," said Lieutenant Dubose, realising to the full how cold he was. "Voila, Monsieur !" The conductor displayed to Poirot with a dramatic gesture the beauty of his sleeping compartment and the neat arrangement of his luggage. "The little valise of Monsieur, I have put it here." His outstretched hand was suggestive. Hercule Poirot placed in it a folded note. "Merci, Monsieur " The conductor became brisk and business-like. "I have the tickets of Monsieur. I will also take the passport, please. Monsieur breaks his journey in Stamboul, I understand?" M. Poirot assented. "There are not many people travelling, I imagine?" he said. "No, Monsieur. I have only two other passengers - both English. A Colonel from India and a young English lady from Baghdad. Monsieur requires anything?" Monsieur demanded a small bottle of Perrier.

Five o'clock in the morning is an awkward time to board a train. There were still two hours before dawn. Conscious of an inadequate night's sleep, and

of a delicate mission successfully accomplished, M. Poirot curled up in a corner and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was half-past nine he sallied forth to the restaurant car in search of hot coffee. There was only one occupant at the moment, obviously the young English lady referred to by the conductor. She was tall, slim and dark - perhaps twenty- eight years of age. There was a kind of cool efficiency in the way she was eating her breakfast and in the way she called to the attendant to bring her more coffee which bespoke a knowledge of the world and of travelling. She wore a dark- coloured travelling dress of some thin material eminently suitable for the heated atmosphere of the train. M. Hercule Poirot, having nothing better to do, amused himself by studying her without appearing to do so. She was, he judged, the kind of young woman who could take care of herself with perfect ease wherever she went. She had poise and efficiency. He rather liked the severe regularity of her features and the delicate pallor of her skin. He liked the burnished black head with its neat waves of hair, and her eyes - cool, impersonal and grey. But she was, he decided, just a little too efficient to be what he called "jolie femme."

Presently another person entered the restaurant car. This was a tall man of between forty and fifty, lean of figure, brown of skin, with hair slightly grizzled round the temples. "The Colonel from India," said Poirot to himself. The newcomer gave a little bow to the girl. "Morning, Miss Debenham." "Good morning, Colonel Arbuthnot." The Colonel was standing with a hand on the chair opposite her. "Any objections?" he asked. "Of course not. Sit down."

"Well, you know, breakfast isn't always a chatty meal." "I should hope not. But I don't bite." The Colonel sat down. "Boy," he called in peremptory fashion. He gave an order for eggs and coffee. His eyes rested for a moment on Hercule Poirot, but they passed on indifferently. Poirot, reading the English mind correctly, knew that he had said to himself. "Only some damned foreigner."

True to their nationality, the two English people were not chatty. They exchanged a few brief remarks and presently the girl rose and went back to her compartment. At lunch time the other two again shared a table and again they both completely ignored the third passenger. Their conversation was more animated than at breakfast. Colonel Arbuthnot talked of the Punjab and occasionally asked the girl a few questions about Baghdad where, it became clear, she had been in a post as governess. In the course of conversation they discovered some mutual friends, which had the

immediate effect of making them more friendly and less stiff. They discussed old Tommy Somebody and old Reggie Someone Else. The Colonel inquired whether she was going straight through to England or whether she was stopping in Stamboul.

"No, I'm going straight on." "Isn't that rather a pity?"

"I came out this way two years ago and spent three days in Stamboul then."

"Oh! I see. Well, I may say I'm very glad you are going right through, because I am."

He made a kind of clumsy little bow, flushing a little as he did so.

"He is susceptible, our Colonel," thought Hercule Poirot to himself with some amusement. "The train, it is as dangerous as a sea voyage!" Miss Debenham said evenly that that would be very nice. Her manner was slightly repressive.

The Colonel, Hercule Poirot noticed, accompanied her back to her compartment. Later they passed through the magnificent scenery of the Taurus. As they looked down towards the Cilician Gates, standing in the corridor side by side, a sigh came suddenly from the girl. Poirot was standing near them and heard her murmur: "It's so beautiful! I wish - I wish-" "Yes?" "I wish I could enjoy it!" Arbuthnot did not answer. The square line of his jaw seemed a little sterner and grimmer. "I wish to Heaven you were out of all this," he said.

"Hush, please. Hush." "Oh! it's all right." He shot a slightly annoyed glance in Poirot's direction. Then he went on: "But I don't like the idea of your being a governess - at the beck and call of tyrannical mothers and their tiresome brats."

She laughed with just a hint of uncontrol in the sound. "Oh! you mustn't think that. The downtrodden governess is quite an exploded myth. I can assure you that it's the parents who are afraid of being bullied by me." They said no more. Arbuthnot was, perhaps, ashamed of his outburst.

"Rather an odd little comedy that I watch here," said Poirot to himself thoughtfully. He was to remember that thought of his later.

They arrived at Konya that night about half-past eleven. The two English travellers got out to stretch their legs, pacing up and down the snowy platform. M. Poirot was content to watch the teeming activity of the station through a window pane. After about ten minutes, however, he decided that a breath of air would not perhaps be a bad thing after all. He made careful

preparations, wrapping himself in several coats and mufflers and encasing his neat boots in goloshes. Thus attired, he descended gingerly to the platform and began to pace its length. He walked out beyond the engine.

It was the voices which gave him the clue to the two indistinct figures standing in the shadow of a traffic van. Arbuthnot was speaking. "Mary-" The girl interrupted him. "Not now. Not now. When it's all over. When it's behind us - then-" Discreetly M. Poirot turned away. He wondered... He would hardly have recognised the cool, efficient voice of Miss Debenham... "Curious," he said to himself.

The next day he wondered whether, perhaps, they had quarrelled. They spoke little to each other. The girl, he thought, looked anxious. There were dark circles under her eyes. It was about half-past two in the afternoon when the train came to a halt. Heads were poked out of windows. A little knot of men were clustered by the side of the line looking and pointing at something under the dining-car.

Poirot leaned out and spoke to the Wagon Lit conductor who was hurrying past. The man answered, and Poirot drew back his head and, turning, almost collided with Mary Debenham who was standing just behind him. "What is the matter?" she asked rather breathlessly in French. "Why are we stopping?" "It is nothing, Mademoiselle. It is something that has caught fire under the

dining-car. Nothing serious. It is put out. They are now repairing the damage. There is no danger, I assure you." She made a little abrupt gesture, as though she were waving the idea of danger aside as something completely unimportant. "Yes, yes, I understand that. But the time!" "The time?" "Yes, this will delay us." "It is possible - yes," agreed Poirot.

"But we can't afford delay! This train is due in at 6.55, and one has to cross the Bosphorus and catch the Simplon Orient Express on the other side at nine o'clock. If there is an hour or two of delay we shall miss the connection." "It is possible, yes," he admitted.

He looked at her curiously. The hand that held the window bar was not quite steady; her lips, too, were trembling. "Does it matter to you very much, Mademoiselle?" he asked. "Yes. Yes, it does. I - I must catch that train." She turned away from him and went down the corridor to join Colonel Arbuthnot.

Her anxiety, however, was needless. Ten minutes later the train started again. It arrived at Hayda-passar only five minutes late, having made up time on the journey. The Bosphorus was rough and M. Poirot did not enjoy

the crossing. He was separated from his travelling companions on the boat and did not see them again.

On arrival at the Galata Bridge he drove straight to the Tokatlian Hotel.

2. The Tokatlian Hotel

At the Tokatlian, Hercule Poirot asked for a room with bath. Then he stepped over to the concierge's desk and inquired for letters. There were three waiting for him and a telegram. His eyebrows rose a little at the sight of the telegram. It was unexpected. He opened it in his usual neat, unhurried fashion. The printed words stood out clearly. "Development you predicted in Kassner case has come unexpectedly. Please return immediately."

"Voila ce qui est embetant," muttered Poirot vexedly. He glanced up at the clock. "I shall have to go on to-night," he said to the concierge. "At what time does the Simplon Orient leave?" "At nine o'clock, Monsieur."

"Can you get me a sleeper?" "Assuredly, Monsieur. There is no difficulty this time of year. The trains are almost empty. First-class or second?"

"First." "Tres bien, Monsieur. How far are you going?" "To London."

"Bien, Monsieur. I will get you a ticket to London and reserve your sleeping-car accommodation in the Stamboul-Calais coach."

Poirot glanced at the clock again. It was ten minutes to eight. "I have time to dine?"

"But assuredly, Monsieur." The little Belgian nodded. He went over and cancelled his room order and crossed the hall to the restaurant. As he was giving his order to the waiter, a hand was placed on his shoulder.

"Ah, mon vieux, but this is an unexpected pleasure!" said a voice behind him. The speaker was a short stout elderly man, his hair cut en brosse. He was smiling delightedly. Poirot sprang up.

"M. Bouc!" "M. Poirot!" M. Bouc was a Belgian, a director of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits, and his acquaintance with the former star of the Belgian police force dated back many years. "You find yourself far from home, mon cher," said M. Bouc.

"A little affair in Syria."

"Ah! and you return home - when?"

"To-night."

"Splendid! I, too. That is to say, I go as far as Lausanne, where I have affairs. You travel on the Simplon Orient, I presume?"

"Yes. I have just asked them to get me a sleeper. It was my intention to remain here some days, but I have, received a telegram recalling me to England on important business."

"Ah!" sighed M. Bouc. "Les affaires - les affaires ! But you, you are at the top of the tree nowadays, mon vieux!"

"Some little success I have had, perhaps." Hercule Poirot tried to look modest but failed signally. M. Bouc laughed. "We will meet later," he said.

Hercule Poirot addressed himself to the task of keeping his moustaches out of the soup. That difficult task accomplished, he glanced round him whilst waiting for the next course. There were only about half a dozen people in the restaurant, and of those half dozen there were only two that interested Hercule Poirot. These two sat at a table not far away. The younger was a likeable-looking young man of thirty, clearly an American. It was, however, not he but his companion who had attracted the little detective's attention.

He was a man perhaps of between sixty and seventy. From a little distance he had the bland aspect of a philanthropist. His slightly bald head, his domed forehead, the smiling mouth that displayed a very white set of false teeth - all seemed to speak of a benevolent personality. Only the eyes belied this assumption. They were small, deep-set and crafty. Not only that. As the man, making some remark to his young companion, glanced across the room, his gaze stopped on Poirot for a moment and just for that second there was a strange malevolence, an unnatural tensivity in the glance. Then he rose. "Pay the bill, Hector," he said.

His voice was slightly husky in tone. It had a queer, soft, dangerous quality. When Poirot rejoined his friend in the lounge, the other two men were just leaving the hotel. Their luggage was being brought down. The younger was supervising the process. Presently he opened the glass door and said: "Quite ready now, Mr. Ratchett." The elder man grunted an assent and passed out.

"Eh bien," said Poirot. "What do you think of those two?"

"They are Americans," said M. Bouc. "Assuredly they are Americans. I meant what did you think of their personalities?" "The young man seemed quite agreeable."

"And the other?" "To tell you the truth, my friend, I did not care for him. He produced on me

an unpleasant impression. And you?" Hercule Poirot was a moment in replying. "When he passed me in the restaurant," he said at last, "I had a curious impression. It was as though a wild animal - an animal savage, but savage! you understand - had passed me by."

"And yet he looked altogether of the most respectable."

"Precisement! The body - the cage - is everything of the most respectable - but through the bars, the wild animal looks out." "You are fanciful, mon vieux," said M. Bouc. "It may be so. But I could not rid myself of the impression that evil had passed me by very close."

"That respectable American gentleman?"

"That respectable American gentleman."

"Well," said M. Bouc cheerfully, "it may be so. There is much evil in the world."

At that moment the door opened and the concierge came towards them. He looked concerned and apologetic. "It is extraordinary, Monsieur," he said to Poirot. "There is not one first-class sleeping berth to be had on the train." "Comment?" cried M. Bouc. "At this time of year? Ah, without doubt there is some party of journalists - of politicians-?"

"I don't know, sir," said the concierge, turning to him respectfully. "But that's how it is."

"Well, well." M. Bouc turned to Poirot. "Have no fear, my friend. We will arrange something. There is always one compartment, the No. 16, which is not engaged. The conductor sees to that!" He smiled, then glanced up at the clock. "Come," he said, "it is time we started."

At the station M. Bouc was greeted with respectful emprossement by the brown-uniformed Wagon Lit conductor. "Good evening, Monsieur. Your compartment is the No. 1."

He called to the porters and they wheeled their load halfway along the carriage on which the tin plates proclaimed its destination: ISTANBUL TRIESTE CALAIS

"You are full up to-night, I hear?" "It is incredible, Monsieur. All the world elects to travel to-night!" "All the same you must find room for this gentleman here. He is a friend of

mine. He can have the No. 16.”
The No. 16?”

“It is taken, Monsieur.” “What?

A glance of understanding passed between them, and the conductor smiled. He was a tall sallow man of middle age. “But yes, Monsieur. As I told you, we are full - full - everywhere.”

“But what passes itself?” demanded M. Bouc angrily. “There is a conference somewhere? It is a party?” “No, Monsieur. It is only chance. It just happens that many people have elected to travel to-night.” M. Bouc made a clicking sound of annoyance.

“At Belgrade,” he said, “there will be the slip coach from Athens. There will also be the Bucharest-Paris coach. But we do not reach Belgrade until tomorrow evening. The problem is for to-night. There is no second-class berth free?”

“There is a second-class berth, Monsieur-” “Well, then-”

“But it is a lady’s berth, there is already a German woman in the compartment - a lady’s maid.”

“La-la, that is awkward,” said M. Bouc. “Do not distress yourself, my friend,” said Poirot. “I must travel in an ordinary carriage.”

“Not at all. Not at all.” He turned once more to the conductor. “Everyone has arrived?”

“It is true,” said the man, “that there is one passenger who has not yet arrived.” He spoke slowly, with hesitation. “But speak then!”

“No. 7 berth - a second-class. The gentleman has not yet come, and it is four minutes to nine.”

“Who is it?” “An Englishman,” the conductor consulted his list. “A M. Harris.”

“A name of good omen,” said Poirot. “I read my Dickens. M. Harris he will not arrive.” “Put Monsieur’s luggage in No. 7,” said M. Bouc. “If this M. Harris arrives we will tell him that he is too late - that berths cannot be retained so long - we will arrange the matter one way or another. What do I care for a M. Harris?”

“As Monsieur pleases,” said the conductor. He spoke to Poirot’s porter, directing him where to go. Then he stood aside from the steps to let Poirot enter the train.

"Tout a fait au bout, Monsieur ," he called. "The end compartment but one." Poirot passed along the corridor, a somewhat slow progress, since most of the people travelling were standing outside their carriages. His polite "Pardons" were uttered with the regularity of clockwork. At last he reached the compartment indicated. Inside it, reaching up to a suitcase, was the tall young American of the Tokatlion. He frowned as Poirot entered.

"Excuse me," he said. "I think you've made a mistake." Then, laboriously in French: "Je crois que vous avez une erreur." Poirot replied in English. "You are Mr. Harris?" "No, my name is MacQueen. I-

But at that moment the voice of the Wagon Lit conductor spoke from over Poirot's shoulder - an apologetic, rather breathless voice. "There is no other berth on the train, Monsieur. The gentleman has to come in here." He was hauling up the corridor window as he spoke and began to lift in Poirot's luggage. Poirot noticed the apology in his tone with some amusement. Doubtless the man had been promised a good tip if he could keep the compartment for the sole use of the other traveller. However, even the most munificent of tips lose their effect when a Director of the Company is on board and issues his orders. The conductor emerged from the compartment, having swung the suitcases up onto the racks. "Voila, Monsieur," he said. "All is arranged. Yours is the upper berth, the No. 7. We start in one minute." He hurried off down the corridor. Poirot re-entered the compartment.

"A phenomenon I have seldom seen," he said cheerfully. "A Wagon Lit conductor himself puts up the luggage! It is unheard of!" His fellow traveller smiled. He had evidently got over his annoyance - had probably decided that it was no good to take the matter otherwise than philosophically. "The train's remarkably full," he said.

A whistle blew, there was a long melancholy cry from the engine. Both men stepped out into the corridor. Outside a voice shouted, "En voiture!" "We're off," said MacQueen. But they were not quite off. The whistle blew again. "I say, sir," said the young man suddenly. "If you'd rather have the lower berth - easier and all that - well, that's all right by me."

A likeable young fellow. "No, no," protested Poirot. "I would not deprive you-

"That's all right-

"You are too amiable-" Polite protests on both

sides.

"It is for one night only," explained Poirot. "At Belgrade-" "Oh! I see. You're getting out at Belgrade-"

"Not exactly. You see-"

There was a sudden jerk. Both men swung round to the window, looking out at the long lighted platform as it slid slowly past them. The Orient Express had started on its three-day journey across Europe.

3. Poirot Refuses a Case

M. Hercule Poirot was a little late in entering the luncheon-car on the following day. He had risen early, had breakfasted almost alone, and had spent the morning going over the notes of the case that was recalling him to London. He had seen little of his travelling companion.

M. Bouc, who was already seated, greeted a greeting and summoned his friend to the empty place opposite him. Poirot sat down and soon found himself in the favoured position of being at the table which was served first and with the choicest morsels. The food, too, was unusually good. It was not till they were eating a delicate cream cheese that M. Bouc allowed his attention to wander to matters other than nourishment. He was at the stage of a meal when one becomes philosophic.

"Ah!" he sighed. "If I had but the pen of a Balzac! I would depict this scene." He waved a hand. "It is an idea, that," said Poirot.

"Ah, you agree? It has not been done, I think? And yet - it lends itself to romance, my friend. All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never perhaps to see each other again."

"And yet," said Poirot, "suppose an accident-"

"Ah, no, my friend-"

"From your point of view it would be regrettable, I agree. But nevertheless let us just for one moment suppose it. Then, perhaps, all these here are linked together - by death."

"Some more wine," said M. Bouc, hastily pouring it out. "You are morbid, mon cher. It is, perhaps the digestion."

"It is true," agreed Poirot, "that the food in Syria was not perhaps quite suited to my stomach." He sipped his wine. Then, leaning back, he ran his eye thoughtfully round the dining-car. There were thirteen people seated there and, as M. Bouc had said, of all classes and nationalities. He began to study them.

At the table opposite them were three men. They were, he guessed, single travellers graded and placed there by the unerring judgment of the restaurant attendants. A big swarthy Italian was picking his teeth with gusto. Opposite him a spare neat Englishman had the expressionless disapproving face of the well-trained servant. Next to the Englishman was a big American in a loud suit - possibly a commercial traveller. "You've got to put it over big," he was saying in a loud, nasal voice.

The Italian removed his toothpick to gesticulate with it freely. "Sure," he said. "That whatta I say alia de time." The Englishman looked out of the window and coughed. Poirot's eye passed on. At a small table, sitting very upright, was one of the ugliest old ladies he had ever seen. It was an ugliness of distinction - it fascinated rather than repelled. She sat very upright. Round her neck was a collar of very large pearls which, improbable though it seemed, were real. Her hands were covered with rings. Her sable coat was pushed back on her shoulders. A very small and expensive black toque was hideously unbecoming to the yellow, toad-like face beneath it.

She was speaking now to the restaurant attendant in a clear, courteous, but completely autocratic tone. "You will be sufficiently amiable to place in my compartment a bottle of mineral water and a large glass of orange juice. You will arrange that I shall have chicken cooked without sauces for dinner this evening - also some boiled fish." The attendant replied respectfully that it should be done. She gave a slight gracious nod of the head and rose. Her glance caught Poirot's and swept over him with the nonchalance of the uninterested aristocrat.

"That is Princess Dragomiroff," said M. Bouc in a low tone. "She is a Russian. Her husband realised all his money before the Revolution and invested it abroad. She is extremely rich. A cosmopolitan." Poirot nodded. He had heard of Princess Dragomiroff.

"She is a personality," said M. Bouc. "Ugly as sin but she makes herself felt. You agree?"

Poirot agreed.

At another of the large tables Mary Debenham was sitting with two other women. One of them was tall and middle-aged, in a plaid blouse and tweed skirt. She had a mass of faded yellow hair unbecomingly arranged in a large bun, wore glasses, and had a long mild amiable face rather like a sheep. She was listening to the third woman, a stout, pleasant-faced, elderly person who was talking in a slow clear monotone which showed no signs of pausing for breath or coming to a stop.

“-and so my daughter said, ‘Why,’ she said, ‘you just can’t apply American methods in this country. It’s natural to the folks here to be indolent,’ she said. ‘They just haven’t got any hustle in them-’ But all the same you’d be surprised to know what our college there is doing. They’ve got a fine staff of teachers. I guess there’s nothing like education. We’ve got to apply our Western ideals and teach the East to recognise them. My daughter says-”

The train plunged into a tunnel. The calm, monotonous voice was drowned.

At the next table, a small one, sat Colonel Arbuthnot - alone. His gaze was fixed upon the back of Mary Debenham’s head. They were not sitting together. Yet it could easily have been managed. Why?

Perhaps, Poirot thought, Mary Debenham had demurred. A governess learns to be careful. Appearances are important. A girl with her living to get has to be discreet. His glance shifted to the other side of the carriage. At the far end, against the wall, was a middle-aged woman dressed in black with a broad, expressionless face. German or Scandinavian, he thought. Probably the German lady’s maid.

Beyond her were a couple leaning forward and talking animatedly together. The man wore English clothes of loose tweed, but he was not English. Though only the back of his head was visible to Poirot, the shape of it and the set of the shoulders betrayed him. A big man, well made. He turned his head suddenly and Poirot saw his profile. A very handsome man of thirty-odd with a big fair moustache.

The woman opposite him was a mere girl - twenty at a guess. A tight-fitting little black coat and skirt, white satin blouse, small chic black toque perched at the fashionable outrageous angle. She had a beautiful foreign-looking face, dead white skin, large brown eyes, jet black hair. She was smoking a cigarette in a long holder. Her manicured hands had deep red nails. She wore one large emerald set in platinum. There was coquetry in her glance and voice.

"Elle est jolie - et chic," murmured Poirot. "Husband and wife - eh?" M. Bouc nodded. Hungarian Embassy, I believe," he said. "A handsome couple."

There were only two more lunchers - Poirot's fellow traveller MacQueen and his employer Mr. Ratchett. The latter sat facing Poirot, and for the second time Poirot studied that unprepossessing face, noting the false benevolence of the brow and the small, cruel eyes.

Doubtless M. Bouc saw a change in his friend's expression. "It is at your wild animal you look?" he asked. Poirot nodded.

As his coffee was brought to him, M. Bouc rose to his feet. Having started before Poirot he had finished some time ago. "I return to my compartment," he said. "Come along presently and converse with me." "With pleasure."

Poirot sipped his coffee and ordered a liqueur. The attendant was passing from table to table with his box of money, accepting payment for bills. The elderly American lady's voice rose shrill and plaintive.

"My daughter said: 'Take a book of food tickets and you'll have no trouble - no trouble at all.' Now, that isn't so. Seems they have to have a ten per cent tip, and then there's that bottle of mineral water - and a queer sort of water too. They didn't have any Evian or Vichy, which seems queer to me."

"It is - they must - how do you say? - serve the water of the country," explained the sheep-faced lady. "Well, it seems queer to me." She looked distastefully at the heap of small change on the table in front of her. "Look at all this peculiar stuff he's given me. Dinars or something. Just a lot of rubbish, it looks like! My daughter said-"

Mary Debenham pushed back her chair and left with a slight bow to the other two. Colonel Arbuthnot got up and followed her. Gathering up her despised money the American woman followed suit, followed by the other one like a sheep. The Hungarians had already departed. The restaurant car was empty save for Poirot and Ratchett and MacQueen. Ratchett spoke to his companion, who got up and left the car. Then he rose himself, but instead of following MacQueen he dropped unexpectedly into the seat opposite Poirot.

"Can you oblige me with a light?" he said. His voice was soft - faintly nasal. "My name is Ratchett." Poirot bowed slightly. He slipped his hand into his pocket and produced a matchbox which he handed to the other man, who took it but did not strike a light.

"I think," he went on, "that I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Hercule Poirot. Is that so?"

Poirot bowed again. "You have been correctly informed, Monsieur." The detective was conscious of those strange shrewd eyes summing him up before the other spoke again.

"In my country," he said, "we come to the point quickly. Mr. Poirot, I want you to take on a job for me."

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows went up a trifle. "My clientele, Monsieur, is limited nowadays. I undertake very few cases." "Why, naturally, I understand that. But this, Mr. Poirot, means big money." He repeated again in his soft, persuasive voice, "Big money."

Hercule Poirot was silent a minute or two. Then he said: "What is it you wish me to do for you, Monsieur - er - Ratchett?" "Mr. Poirot, I am a rich man - a very rich man. Men in that position have enemies. I have an enemy."

"Only one enemy?" "Just what do you mean by that question?" asked Ratchett sharply. "Monsieur, in my experience when a man is in a position to have, as you say, enemies, then it does not usually resolve itself into one enemy only." Ratchett seemed relieved by Poirot's answer. He said quickly: "Why, yes, I appreciate that point. Enemy or enemies - it doesn't matter. What does matter is my safety."

"Safety?" "My life has been threatened, Mr. Poirot. Now I'm a man who can take pretty good care of himself." From the pocket of his coat his hand brought a small automatic into sight for a moment. He continued grimly. "I don't think I'm the kind of man to be caught napping. But, as I look at it, I might as well make assurance doubly sure. I fancy you're the man for my money, Mr. Poirot. And remember - big money."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for some minutes. His face was completely expressionless. The other could have had no clue as to what thoughts were passing in that mind. "I regret, Monsieur," he said at length, "that I cannot oblige you."

The other looked at him shrewdly. "Name your figure, then," he said. Poirot shook his head.

"You do not understand, Monsieur. I have been very fortunate in my profession. I have made enough money to satisfy both my needs and my caprices. I take now only such cases as - interest me."

"You've got a pretty good nerve," said Ratchett. "Will twenty thousand dollars tempt you?"

"It will not." "If you're holding out for more, you won't get it. I know what a thing's worth to me." "I, also, M. Ratchett."

"What's wrong with my proposition?" Poirot rose. "If you will forgive me for being personal - I do not like your face, M. Ratchett," he said. And with that he left the restaurant car.

4. A Cry in the Night

The Simplon Orient Express arrived at Belgrade at a quarter to nine that evening. It was not due to depart again until 9.15, so Poirot descended to the platform. He did not, however, remain there long. The cold was bitter, and though the platform itself was protected, heavy snow was falling outside. He returned to his compartment. The conductor, who was on the platform stamping his feet and waving his arms to keep warm, spoke to him. "Your valises have been moved, Monsieur. To the compartment No. 1, the compartment of M. Bouc." "But where is Monsieur Bouc, then?"

"He has moved into the coach from Athens which has just been put on." Poirot went in search of his friend. M. Bouc waved his protestations aside. "It is nothing. It is nothing. It is more convenient like this. You are going through to England, so it is better that you should stay in the through coach to Calais. Me, I am very well here. It is most peaceful. This coach is empty save for myself and one little Greek doctor. Ah! my friend, what a night! They say there has not been so much snow for years. Let us hope we shall not be held up. I am not too happy about it, I can tell you."

At 9.15 punctually the train pulled out of the station, and shortly afterwards Poirot got up, said good night to his friend, and made his way along the corridor back into his own coach which was in front next to the dining-car. On this, the second day of the journey, barriers were breaking down. Colonel Arbuthnot was standing at the door of his compartment talking to MacQueen. When MacQueen saw Poirot he broke off something he was saying. He looked very much surprised. "Why," he cried, "I thought you'd left us. You said you were getting off at Belgrade." "You misunderstood

me,” said Poirot, smiling. “I remember now, the train started from Stamboul just as we were talking about it.”

“But, man, your baggage. It’s gone.” “It has been moved into another compartment, that is all.” “Oh! I see.” He resumed his conversation with Arbuthnot, and Poirot passed on down the corridor. Two doors from his own compartment, the elderly American, Mrs. Hubbard, was standing talking to the sheep-like lady, who was a Swede. Mrs. Hubbard was pressing a magazine on the other. “No, do take it, my dear,” she said. “I’ve got plenty of other things to read. “My, isn’t the cold something frightful?” She nodded amicably to Poirot.

“You are most kind,” said the Swedish lady.

“Not at all. I hope you’ll sleep well and that your head will be better in the morning.”

“It is the cold only. I make now myself a cup of tea.”

“Have you got some aspirin? Are you sure now? I’ve got plenty. Well, good night, my dear.”

She turned to Poirot conversationally as the other woman departed.

“Poor creature, she’s a Swede. As far as I can make out she’s a kind of missionary. A teaching one. A nice creature, but doesn’t talk much English. She was most interested in what I told her about my daughter.” Poirot, by now, knew all about Mrs. Hubbard’s daughter. Everyone on the train who could understand English did! How she and her husband were on the staff of a big American college in Smyrna, and how this was Mrs. Hubbard’s first journey to the East, and what she thought of the Turks and their slipshod ways and the condition of their roads.

The door next to them opened and the thin pale manservant stepped out. Inside, Poirot caught a glimpse of Mr. Ratchett sitting up in bed. He saw Poirot and his face changed, darkening with anger. Then the door was shut. Mrs. Hubbard drew Poirot a little wide.

“You know, I’m dead scared of that man. Oh! not the valet - the other. His master. Master, indeed! There’s something wrong about that man. My daughter always says I’m very intuitive. ‘When Mamma gets a hunch, she’s dead right,’ that’s what my daughter says. And I’ve got a hunch about that man. He’s next door to me and I don’t like it. I put my grips against the communicating door last night. I thought I heard him trying the handle. Duo you know, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if that man turned out to be a

murderer - one of these train robbers you read about. I daresay I'm foolish, but there it is. I'm absolutely scared to death of the man! My daughter said I'd have an easy journey, but somehow I don't feel happy about it. It may be foolish, but I feel as if anything might happen - anything at all. And how that nice young fellow can bear to be his secretary, I can't think."

Colonel Arbuthnot and MacQueen were coming towards them down the corridor. "Come into my carriage," MacQueen was saying. "It isn't made up for the night yet. Now what I want to get right about your policy in India is this-" The two men passed and went on down the corridor to MacQueen's carriage.

Mrs. Hubbard said good night to Poirot. "I guess I'll go right to bed and read," she said. "Good night." "Good night, Madame." Poirot passed into his own compartment, which was the next one beyond Ratchett's. He undressed and got into bed, read for about half an hour and then turned out the light.

He awoke some hours later, awoke with a start. He knew what it was that had wakened him - a loud groan, almost a cry, somewhere close at hand. At the same moment the ting of a bell sounded sharply.

Poirot sat up and switched on the light. He noticed that the train was at a standstill - presumably at a station. That cry had startled him. He remembered that it was Ratchett who had the next compartment. He got out of bed and opened the door just as the Wagon Lit conductor came hurrying along the corridor and knocked on Ratchett's door.

Poirot kept his door open a crack and watched. The conductor tapped a second time. A bell rang and a light showed over another door farther down. The conductor glanced over his shoulder. At the same moment a voice from within the next compartment called out: "Ce n'est hen. Je me suis trompe."

"Bien, Monsieur ." The conductor scurried off again, to knock at the door where the light was showing. Poirot returned to bed, his mind relieved, and switched off the light. He glanced at his watch. It was just twenty-three minutes to one.

5. The Crime

He found it difficult to go to sleep again at once. For one thing he missed the motion of the train. If it was a station outside, it was curiously quiet. By contrast the noises on the train seemed unusually loud. He could hear

Ratchett moving about next door - a click as he pulled down the washbasin, the sound of the tap running, a splashing noise, then another click as the basin shut to again. Footsteps passed up the corridor outside, the shuffling footsteps of someone in bedroom slippers.

Hercule Poirot lay awake staring at the ceiling. Why was the station outside so silent? His throat felt dry. He had forgotten to ask for his usual bottle of mineral water. He looked at his watch again. Just after a quarter past one. He would ring for the conductor and ask for some mineral water. His finger went out to the bell, but he paused as in the stillness he heard a ting. The man couldn't answer every bell at once.

Ting... Ting... Ting...

It sounded again and again. Where was the man? Somebody was getting impatient. Ti-i-i-ing! Whoever it was, was keeping a finger solidly on the push-button. Suddenly with a rush, his footsteps echoing up the aisle, the man came. He knocked at a door not far from Poirot's own. Then came voices - the conductor's, deferential, apologetic; and a woman's, insistent and voluble.

Mrs. Hubbard! Poirot smiled to himself.

The altercation - if it was one - went on for some time. Its proportions were ninety per cent of Mrs. Hubbard's to a soothing ten per cent of the conductor's. Finally the matter seemed to be adjusted. Poirot heard distinctly a "Bonne nuit, Madame," and a closing door.

He pressed his own finger on the bell. The conductor arrived promptly. He looked hot and worried. "De Teau minerale, s'il vous Plait."

"Bien, Monsieur." Perhaps a twinkle in Poirot's eye led him to unburden himself. "La dame americaine-"

"Yes?"

He wiped his forehead. "Imagine to yourself the time I have had with her!

She insists - but insists - that there is a man in her compartment! Figure to yourself, Monsieur. In a space of this size." He swept a hand round. "Where would he conceal himself? I argue with her. I point out that it is impossible. She insists. She woke up, and there was a man there. And how, I ask, did he get out and leave the door bolted behind him? But she will not listen to reason. As though there were not enough to worry us already.

This snow-"

“Snow?”

“But yes, Monsieur. Monsieur has not noticed? The train has stopped. We have run into a snowdrift. Heaven knows how long we shall be here. I remember once being snowed up for seven days.”

“Where are we?”

“Between Vincovci and Brod.”

“La-la,” said Poirot vexedly. The man withdrew and returned with the water.

“Bon soir, Monsieur .”

Poirot drank a glass of water and composed himself to sleep.

He was just dropping off when something again woke him. This time it was as though something heavy had fallen with a thud against the door. He sprang up, opened it and looked out. Nothing. But to his right, some distance down the corridor, a woman wrapped in a scarlet kimono was retreating from him. At the other end, sitting on his little seat, the conductor was entering up figures on large sheets of paper. Everything was deathly quiet.

“Decidedly I suffer from the nerves,” said Poirot and retired to bed again. This time he slept till morning.

When he awoke the train was still at a standstill. He raised a blind and looked out. Heavy banks of snow surrounded the train. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was past nine o’clock. At a quarter to ten, neat, spruce and dandified as ever, he made his way to the restaurant car, where a chorus of woe was going on.

Any barriers there might have been between the passengers had now quite broken down. All were united by a common misfortune. Mrs. Hubbard was loudest in her lamentations.

“My daughter said it would be the easiest way in the world. Just sit in the train until I got to Parrus. And now we may be here for days and days,” she wailed. “And my boat sails day after to-morrow. How am I going to catch it now? Why, I can’t even wire to cancel my passage. I’m just too mad to talk about it!”

The Italian said that he had urgent business himself in Milan. The large American said that that was “too bad, Ma’am,” and soothingly expressed a hope that the train might make up time.

"My sister - her children wait me," said the Swedish lady, and wept. "I get no word to them. What they think? They will say bad things have happen to me."

"How long shall we be here?" demanded Mary Debenham. "Doesn't anybody know?"

Her voice sounded impatient, but Poirot noted that there were no signs of that almost feverish anxiety which she had displayed during the check to the Taurus Express.

Mrs. Hubbard was off again. "There isn't anybody knows a thing on this train. And nobody's trying to do anything. Just a pack of useless foreigners. Why, if this were at home, there'd be someone at least trying to do something!"

Arbuthnot turned to Poirot and spoke in careful British French. "Vous etes un directeur de la ligne, je crois, Monsieur. Vous pouvez nous dire-"

Smiling, Poirot corrected him. "No, no," he said in English. "It is not I. You confound me with my friend, M. Bouc."

"Oh, I'm sorry"

"Not at all. It is most natural. I am now in the compartment that he had formerly."

M. Bouc was not present in the restaurant car. Poirot looked about to notice who else was absent. Princess Dragomiroff was missing, and the Hungarian couple. Also Ratchett, his valet, and the German lady's maid.

The Swedish lady wiped her eyes.

"I am foolish," she said. "I am bad to cry. All is for the best, whatever happen."

This Christian spirit, however, was far from being shared.

"That's all very well," said MacQueen restlessly. "We may be here for days."

"What is this country anyway?" demanded Mrs. Hubbard tearfully.

On being told it was Jugo-Slavia, she said: "Oh! one of these Balkan things. What can you expect?"

"You are the only patient one, Mademoiselle," said Poirot to Miss Debenham.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "What can one do?"

"You are a philosopher, Mademoiselle."

"That implies a detached attitude. I think my attitude is more selfish. I have learned to save myself useless emotion." V She was speaking more to herself than to him. She was not even looking at him. Her gaze went past him, out of the window to where the snow lay in heavy masses.

"You are a strong character, Mademoiselle," said Poirot gently. "You are, I think, the strongest character amongst us."

"Oh! no. No, indeed. I know one far, far stronger than I am."

"And that is-?"

She seemed suddenly to come to herself, to realise that she was talking to a stranger and foreigner, with whom, until this morning, she had exchanged only half a dozen sentences. She laughed, a polite but estranging laugh.

"Well - that old lady, for instance. You have probably noticed her. A very ugly old lady but rather fascinating. She has only to lift a little finger and ask for something in a polite voice - and the whole train runs."

"It runs also for my friend M. Bouc," said Poirot. "But that is because he is a director of the line, not because he has a strong character." Mary Debenham smiled.

The morning wore away. Several people, Poirot amongst them, remained in the dining-car. The communal life was felt, at the moment, to pass the time better. He heard a good deal more about Mrs. Hubbard's daughter, and he heard the lifelong habits of Mr. Hubbard, deceased, from his rising in the morning and commencing breakfast with a cereal to his final rest at night in the bed-socks that Mrs. Hubbard herself had been in the habit of knitting for him.

It was when he was listening to a confused account of the missionary aims of the Swedish lady that one of the Wagon Lit conductors came into the car and stood at his elbow.

"Pardon, Monsieur."

"Yes?"

"The compliments of M. Bouc, and he would be glad if you would be so kind as to come to him for a few minutes." Poirot rose, uttered excuses to the Swedish lady and followed the man out of the dining-car. It was not his own conductor, but a big fair man.

He followed his guide down the corridor of his own carriage and along the corridor of the next one. The man tapped at a door, then stood aside to let Poirot enter.

The compartment was not M. Bouc's own. It was a second-class one - chosen presumably because of its slightly larger size. It certainly gave the impression of being crowded.

M. Bouc himself was sitting on the small seat in the opposite corner. In the corner next the window, facing him, was a small dark man looking out at the snow. Standing up and quite preventing Poirot from advancing any farther were a big man in blue uniform (the chef de train) and his own Wagon Lit conductor.

"Ah! my good friend," cried M. Bouc. "Come in. We have need of you."

The little man in the window shifted along the seat, and Poirot squeezed past the other two men and sat down facing his friend.

The expression on M. Bouc's face gave him, as he would have expressed it, furiously to think. It was clear that something out of the common had happened.

"What has occurred?" he asked.

"You may well ask that. First this snow - this stoppage. And now-" He paused - and a sort of strangled gasp came from the Wagon Lit conductor.

"And now what?"

"And now a passenger lies dead in his berth - stabbed." M. Bouc spoke with a kind of calm desperation.

"A passenger? Which passenger?"

"An American. A man called - called-" he consulted some notes in front of him. "Ratchett. That is right - Ratchett?" "Yes, Monsieur," the Wagon Lit man gulped.

Poirot looked at him. He was as white as chalk. "You had better let that man sit down," he said. "He may faint otherwise." The chef de train moved slightly and the Wagon Lit man sank down in the corner and buried his face in his hands.

"Brr!" said Poirot. "This is serious!"

"Certainly it is serious. To begin with, a murder - that in itself is a calamity of the first water. But not only that, the circumstances are unusual. Here we

are, brought to a standstill. We may be here for hours - and not only hours - days! Another circumstance - passing through most countries we have the police of that country on the train. But in Jugo-Slavia, no. You comprehend?"

"It is a position of great difficulty," said Poirot.

"There is worse to come. Dr. Constantine - I forgot, I have not introduced you. Dr. Constantine, M. Poirot."

The little dark man bowed, and Poirot returned the bow.

"Dr. Constantine is of the opinion that death occurred at about 1 A.M."

"It is difficult to speak exactly in these matters," said the doctor, "but I think I can say definitely that death occurred between midnight and two in the morning."

"When was this M. Ratchett last seen alive?" asked Poirot.

"He is known to have been alive at about twenty minutes to one, when he spoke to the conductor," said M. Bouc.

"That is quite correct," said Poirot. "I myself heard what passed. That is the last thing known?"

"Yes." Poirot turned toward the doctor, who continued.

"The window of M. Ratchett's compartment was found wide open, leading one to suppose that the murderer escaped that way. But in my opinion that open window is a blind. Anyone departing that way would have left distinct traces in the snow. There were none."

"The crime was discovered - when?" asked Poirot.

"Michel!" The Wagon Lit conductor sat up. His face still looked pale and frightened.

"Tell this gentleman exactly what occurred," ordered M. Bouc. The man spoke somewhat jerkily. "The valet of this M. Ratchett, he tapped several times at the door this morning. There was no answer. Then, half an hour ago, the restaurant car attendant came. He wanted to know if Monsieur was taking dejeuner. It was eleven o'clock, you comprehend."

"I open the door for him with my key. But there is a chain, too, and that is fastened. There is no answer and it is very still in there, and cold - but cold. With the window open and snow drifting in. I thought the gentleman had had a fit, perhaps. I got the chef de train. We broke the chain and went in. He was - Ah! c'était terrible !" He buried his face in his hands again.

"The door was locked and chained on the inside," said Poirot thoughtfully. "It was not suicide - eh?" The Greek doctor gave a sardonic laugh. "Does a man who commits suicide stab himself in ten-twelve-fifteen places?" he asked. Poirot's eyes opened. "That is great ferocity," he said.

"It is a woman," said the chef de train, speaking for the first time. "Depend upon it, it was a woman. Only a woman would stab like that."

Dr. Constantine screwed up his face thoughtfully. "She must have been a very strong woman," he said. "It is not my desire to speak technically - that is only confusing; but I can assure you that one or two of the blows were delivered with such force as to drive them through hard belts of bone and muscle."

"It was clearly not a scientific crime," said Poirot.

"It was most unscientific," returned Dr. Constantine. "The blows seem to have been delivered haphazard and at random. Some have glanced off, doing hardly any damage. It is as though somebody had shut his eyes and then in a frenzy struck blindly again and again."

"C'est une femme," said the chef de train again. "Women are like that. When they are enraged they have great strength." He nodded so sagely that everyone suspected a personal experience of his own.

"I have, perhaps, something to contribute to your store of knowledge," said Poirot. "M. Ratchett spoke to me yesterday. He told me, as far as I was able to understand him, that he was in danger of his life."

" 'Bumped off - that is the American expression, is it not?' asked M. Bouc. "Then it is not a woman. It is a 'gangster' or a 'gunman.' "

The chef de train looked pained at seeing his theory come to nought. "If so," said Poirot, "it seems to have been done very amateurishly." His tone expressed professional disapproval.

"There is a large American on the train,," said M. Bouc, pursuing his idea. "A common-looking man with terrible clothes. He chews the gum, which I believe is not done in good circles. You know whom I mean?" The Wagon Lit conductor to whom he had appealed nodded.

"Ouz, Monsieur, the No. 16. But it cannot have been he. I should have seen him enter or leave the compartment."

"You might not. You might not. But we will go into that presently. The question is, what to do?" He looked at Poirot. Poirot looked back at him.

"Come, my friend," said M. Bouc. "You comprehend what I am about to ask of you. I know your powers. Take command of this investigation! No, no, do not refuse. See, to us it is serious - I speak for the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits. By the time the Jugo-Slavian police arrive, how simple if we can present them with the solution! Otherwise delays, annoyances, a million and one inconveniences. Perhaps, who knows, serious annoyance to innocent persons. Instead - you solve the mystery! We say, 'A murder has occurred - this is the criminal!'"

"And suppose I do not solve it?" v "Ah, mon cher " M. Bouc's voice became positively caressing. "I know your reputation. I know something of your methods. This is the ideal case for you. To look up the antecedents of all these people, to discover their bona fides - all that takes time and endless inconvenience. But have I not heard you say often that to solve a case a man has only to lie back in his chair and think? Do that. Interview the passengers on the train, view the body, examine what clues there are, and then - well, I have faith in you! I am assured that it is no idle boast of yours. Lie back and think - use (as I have heard you say so often) the little grey cells of the mind - and you will know!"

He leaned forward, looking affectionately at the detective.

"Your faith touches me, my friend," said Poirot emotionally. "As you say, this cannot be a difficult case. I myself last night - but we will not speak of that now. In truth, this problem intrigues me. I was reflecting, not half an hour ago, that many hours of boredom lay ahead whilst we are stuck here. And now - a problem lies ready to my hand."

"You accept then?" said M. Bouc eagerly.

"C'est entendu. You place the matter in my hands."

"Good - we are all at your service."

"To begin with, I should like a plan of the Istanbul-Calais coach, with a note of the people who occupied the several compartments, and I should also like to see their passports and their tickets."

"Michel will get you those." The Wagon Lit conductor left the compartment.

"What other passengers are there on the train?" asked Poirot.

"In this coach Dr. Constantine and I are the only travellers. In the coach from Bucharest is an old gentleman with a lame leg. He is well known to the conductor. Beyond that are the ordinary carriages, but these do not concern

us, since they were locked after dinner had been served last night. Forward of the Istanbul-Calais coach there is only the dining-car."

"Then it seems," said Poirot slowly, "as though we must look for our murderer in the Istanbul-Calais coach." He turned to the doctor. "That is what you were hinting, I think?"

The Greek nodded. "At half an hour after midnight we ran into the snowdrift. No one can have left the train since then." M. Bouc said solemnly, "The murderer is with us - on the train now..."

6. A Woman

"First of all," said Poirot, "I should like a word or two with young Mr. MacQueen. He may be able to give us valuable information."

"Certainly," said M. Bouc. He turned to the chef de train. "Get Mr. MacQueen to come here."

The chef de train left the carriage. The conductor returned with a bundle of passports and tickets. M. Bouc took them from him. "Thank you, Michel. It would be best now, I think, if you were to go back to your post. We will take your evidence formally later."

"Very good, Monsieur," said Michel, and in his turn left the carriage.

"After we have seen young MacQueen," said Poirot, "perhaps M. le docteur will come with me to the dead man's carriage."

"Certainly."

"After we have finished there-" But at this moment the chef de train returned with Hector MacQueen. M. Bouc rose. "We are a little cramped here," he said pleasantly. "Take my seat, Mr. MacQueen. M. Poirot will sit opposite you - so." He turned to the chef de train. "Clear all the people out of the restaurant car," he said, "and let it be left free for M. Poirot. You will conduct your interviews there, mon cher?"

"It would be the most convenient, yes," agreed Poirot.

MacQueen had stood looking from one to the other, not quite following the rapid flow of French. "Qu'est - ce qu'il y a?" he began laboriously. "Pourquoi?"

With a vigorous gesture Poirot motioned him to the seat in the corner. He took it and began once more. "Pourquoi?" Then checking himself and

relapsing into his own tongue: "What's up on the train? Has anything happened?" He looked from one man to another.

Poirot nodded. "Exactly. Something has happened. Prepare yourself for a shock. Your employer, M. Ratchett, is dead." MacQueen's mouth pursed itself into a whistle. Except that his eyes grew a shade brighter, he showed no signs of shock or distress.

"So they got him after all," he said.

"What exactly do you mean by that phrase, Mr. MacQueen?" MacQueen hesitated. "You are assuming," said Poirot, "that M. Ratchett was murdered?" "Wasn't he?" This time MacQueen did show surprise. "Why, yes," he said slowly. "That's just what I did think. Do you mean he just died in his sleep? Why, the old man was as tough as - as tough-" He stopped, at a loss for a simile. "No, no," said Poirot. "Your assumption was quite right. M. Ratchett was murdered. Stabbed. But I should like to know why you were so sure it was murder, and not just - death." MacQueen hesitated. "I must get this clear," he said. "Who exactly are you? And where do you come in?"

"I represent the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits." Poirot paused, then added, "I am a detective. My name is Hercule Poirot." If he expected an effect he did not get one. MacQueen said merely, "Oh! yes?" and waited for him to go on.

"You know the name perhaps?"

"Why, it does seem kind of familiar. Only I always thought it was a woman's dressmaker."

Hercule Poirot looked at him with distaste. "It is incredible!" he said.

"What's incredible?"

"Nothing. Let us advance with the matter in hand. I want you to tell me, M. MacQueen, all that you know about the dead man. You were not related to him?"

"No. I am - was - his secretary."

"For how long have you held that post?"

"Just over a year."

"Please give me all the information you can."

"Well, I met Mr. Ratchett just over a year ago when I was in Persia-" Poirot interrupted. "What were you doing there?"

"I had come over from New York to look into an oil concession. I don't suppose you want to hear all about that. My friends and I had been let in rather badly over it. Mr. Ratchett was in the same hotel. He had just had a row with his secretary. He offered me the job and I took it. I was at a loose end and glad to find a well-paid job ready made, as it were."

"And since then?"

"We've travelled about. Mr. Ratchett wanted to see the world. He was hampered by knowing no languages. I acted more as a courier than as a secretary. It was a pleasant life."

"Now tell me as much as you can about your employer." The young man shrugged his shoulders. A perplexed expression passed over his face.

"That's not so easy."

"What was his full name?"

"Samuel Edward Ratchett."

"He was an American citizen?"

"Yes."

"What part of America did he come from?"

"I don't know."

"Well, tell me what you do know."

"The actual truth is, Mr. Poirot, that I know nothing at all! Mr. Ratchett never spoke of himself or of his life in America."

"Why do you think that was?"

"I don't know. I imagined that he might be ashamed of his beginnings. Some men are."

"Does that strike you as a satisfactory solution?"

"Frankly, it doesn't."

"Has he any relatives?"

"He never mentioned any."

Poirot pressed the point. "You must have formed some theory, Mr. MacQueen."

"Well, Yes, I did. For one thing, I don't believe Ratchett was his real name. I think he left America definitely in order to escape someone or something. I think he was successful - until a few weeks ago."

"And then?"

"He began to get letters - threatening letters."

"Did you see them?"

"Yes. It was my business to attend to his correspondence. The first letter came a fortnight ago."

"Were these letters destroyed?"

"No, I think I've got a couple still in my files - one I know Ratchett tore up in a rage. Shall I get them for you?"

"If you would be so good."

MacQueen left the compartment. He returned a few minutes later and laid down two sheets of rather dirty notepaper before Poirot. The first letter ran as follows:

Thought you'd double-cross us and get away with it, did you? Not on your life. We're out to GET you, Ratchett, and we WILL get you!

There was no signature.

With no comment beyond raised eyebrows, Poirot picked up the second letter.

We're going to take you for a ride, Ratchett. Some time soon. We're going to GET you - see ?

Poirot laid the letter down. "The style is monotonous!" he said. "More so than the handwriting." MacQueen stared at him.

"You would not observe," said Poirot pleasantly. "It requires the eye of one used to such things. This letter was not written by one person, M. MacQueen. Two or more persons wrote it - each writing one letter of a word at a time. Also, the letters are printed. That makes the task of identifying the handwriting much more difficult." He paused, then said: "Did you know that M. Ratchett had applied for help to me?"

"To you?" MacQueen's astonished tone told Poirot quite certainly that the young man had not known of it.

The detective nodded. "Yes. He was alarmed. Tell me, how did he act when he received the first letter?" MacQueen hesitated. "It's difficult to say. He - he - passed it off with a laugh in that quiet way of his. But somehow-" he gave a slight shiver - "I felt that there was a good deal going on underneath the quietness."

Poirot nodded. Then he asked an unexpected question. "Mr. MacQueen, will you tell me, quite honestly, exactly how you regarded your employer? Did you like him?"

Hector MacQueen took a moment or two before replying. "No," he said at last. "I did not." "Why."

"I can't exactly say. He was always quite pleasant in his manner." He paused, then said: "I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Poirot. I disliked and distrusted him. He was, I am sure, a cruel and dangerous man. I must admit, though, that I have no reasons to advance for my opinion."

"Thank you, Mr. MacQueen. One further question: when did you last see Mr. Ratchett alive?"

"Last evening about-" he thought for a minute - "ten o'clock, I should say. I went into his compartment to take down some memoranda from him."

"On what subject?"

"Some tiles and antique pottery that he bought in Persia. What had been delivered was not what he had purchased. There has been a long, vexatious correspondence on the subject."

"And that was the last time Mr. Ratchett was seen alive?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Do you know when Mr. Ratchett received the last threatening letter?"

"On the morning of the day we left Constantinople."

"There is one more question I must ask you, Mr. MacQueen. Were you on good terms with your employer?" The young man's eyes twinkled suddenly.

"This is where I'm supposed to go all goose fleshy down the back. In the words of a best seller, 'You've nothing on me.' Ratchett and I were on perfectly good terms."

"Perhaps, Mr. MacQueen, you will give me your full name and your address in America."

MacQueen gave his name - Hector Willard MacQueen - and an address in New York. Poirot leaned back against the cushions. "That is all for the present, Mr. MacQueen," he said. "I should be obliged if you would keep the matter of Mr. Ratchett's death to yourself for a little time."

"His valet, Masterman, will have to know."

"He probably knows already," said Poirot drily. "If so, try to get him to hold his tongue."

"That oughtn't to be difficult. He's a Britisher and, as he calls it, he 'keeps to himself.' He has a low opinion of Americans, and no opinion at all of any other nationality."

"Thank you, Mr. MacQueen." The American left the carriage.

"Well?" demanded M. Bouc. "You believe what he says, this young man?"

"He seems honest and straightforward. He did not pretend to any affection for his employer, as he probably would have done had he been involved in any way. It is true, Mr. Ratchett did not tell him that he had tried to enlist my services and failed, but I do not think that that is really a suspicious circumstance. I fancy Mr. Ratchett was a gentleman who kept his own counsel on every possible occasion."

"So you pronounce one person at least innocent of the crime," said M. Bouc jovially. Poirot cast on him a look of reproach. "Me, I suspect everybody till the last minute," he said. "All the same, I must admit that I cannot see this sober, long-headed MacQueen losing his head and stabbing his victim twelve or fourteen times. It is not in accord with his psychology - not at all."

"No," said M. Bouc thoughtfully. "That is the act of a man driven almost crazy with a frenzied hate - it suggests rather the Latin temperament. Or else it suggests, as our friend the chef de train insisted - a woman."

7. The Body

Followed by Dr. Constantine, Poirot made his way to the next coach and to the compartment occupied by the murdered man. The conductor came and unlocked the door for them with his key. The two men passed inside. Poirot turned inquiringly to his companion. "How much has been disarranged in this compartment?"

"Nothing has been touched. I was careful not to move the body in making my examination." Poirot nodded. He looked round him. The first thing that struck the senses was the intense cold. The window was pushed down as far as it would go, and the blind was drawn up. "Brrr," observed Poirot. The other smiled appreciatively.

"I did not like to close it," he said.

Poirot examined the window carefully. "You are right," he announced. "Nobody left the carriage this way. Possibly the open window was intended to suggest that somebody did; but if so, the snow has defeated the murderer's intention." He examined the frame of the window carefully. Taking a small case from his pocket he blew a little powder over the frame. "No fingerprints at all," he said. "That means it: has been wiped. Well, if there had been fingerprints they would have told us very little. They would have been those of Mr. Ratchett or his valet or the conductor. Criminals do not make mistakes of that kind nowadays. "And that being so," he added cheerfully, "we might as well shut the window. Positively it is the cold storage in here!" He suited the action to the word and then turned his attention for the first time to the motionless figure lying in the bunk.

Ratchett lay on his back. His pyjama jacket, stained with rusty patches, had been unbuttoned and thrown back.

"I had to see the nature of the wounds, you see," explained the doctor. Poirot nodded. He bent over the body. Finally he straightened himself with a

slight grimace. "It is not pretty," he said. "Someone must have stood there and stabbed him again and again. How many wounds are there exactly?"

"I make it twelve. One or two are so slight as to be practically scratches. On the other hand, at least three would be capable of causing death."

Something in the doctor's tone caught Poirot's attention. He looked at him sharply. The little Greek was standing staring down at the body with a puzzled frown.

"Something strikes you as odd, does it not?" he asked gently. "Speak, my friend. There is something here that puzzles you?"

"You are right," acknowledged the other.

"What is it?"

"You see these two wounds - here and here-" He pointed. "They are deep. Each cut must have severed blood vessels - and yet the edges do not gape. They have not bled as one would have expected."

"Which suggests?"

"That the man was already dead - some little time dead - when they were delivered. But that is surely absurd."

"It would seem so," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Unless our murderer figured to himself that he had not accomplished his job properly and came back to make quite sure - but that is manifestly absurd! Anything else?"

"Well, just one thing."

"And that?"

"You see this wound here - under the right arm - near the right shoulder. Take this pencil of mine. Could you deliver such a blow?"

Poirot poised his hand. "Precisement," he said. "I see. With the right hand it is exceedingly difficult, almost impossible. One would have to strike backhanded, as it were. But if the blow were struck with the left hand-"

"Exactly, M. Poirot. That blow was almost certainly struck with the left hand."

"So that our murderer is left-handed? No, it is more difficult than that, is it not?"

"As you say, M. Poirot. Some of these other blows are just as obviously right-handed."

"Two people. We are back at two people again," murmured the detective. He asked abruptly: "Was the electric light on?"

"It is difficult to say. You see, it is turned off by the conductor every morning about ten o'clock."

"The switches will tell us," said Poirot. He examined the switch of the top light and also the roll-back bed-head light. The former was turned off. The latter was closed. "Eh bien," he said thoughtfully. "We have here a hypothesis of the First and the Second Murderer, as the great Shakespeare would put it. The First Murderer stabbed his victim and left the compartment, turning off the light. The Second Murderer came in in the dark, did not see that his or her work had been done, and stabbed at least twice at a dead body. Que pensez - vous de gal"

"Magnificent!" said the little doctor with enthusiasm.

The other's eyes twinkled. "You think so? I am glad. It sounded to me a little like the nonsense."

"What other explanation can there be?"

"That is just what I am asking myself. Have we here a coincidence, or what? Are there any other inconsistencies, such as would point to two people being concerned?"

"I think I can say yes. Some of these blows, as I have already said, point to a weakness - a lack of strength or a lack of determination. They are feeble, glancing blows. But this one here - and this one-" Again he pointed. "Great strength was needed for those blows. They have penetrated the muscle."

"They were, in your opinion, delivered by a man?"

"Most certainly."

"They could not have been delivered by a woman?"

"A young, vigorous, athletic woman might have struck them, especially if she were in the grip of a strong emotion; but it is in my opinion highly unlikely."

Poirot was silent a moment or two.

The other asked anxiously, "You understand my point?"

"Perfectly," said Poirot. "The matter begins to clear itself up wonderfully! The murderer was a man of great strength - he was feeble - it was a woman - it was a right-handed person - it was a left-handed person. Ah! c'est rigolo,

tout cal" He spoke with sudden anger. "And the victim - what does he do in all this? Does he cry out? Does he struggle? Does he defend himself?"

He slipped his hand under the pillow and drew out the automatic pistol which Ratchett had shown him the day before. "Fully loaded, you see," he said. They looked round them. Ratchett's day clothing was hanging from the hooks on the wall. On the small table formed by the lid of the wash basin were various objects. False teeth in a glass of water. Another glass, empty. A bottle of mineral water. A large flask. An ash-tray containing the butt of a cigar and some charred fragments of paper; also two burnt matches.

The doctor picked up the empty glass and sniffed it. "Here is the explanation of the victim's inertia," he said quietly.

"Drugged?"

"Yes."

Poirot nodded. He picked up the two matches and scrutinised them carefully.

"You have a clue then?" demanded the little doctor eagerly.

"Those two matches are of different shapes," said Poirot. "One is flatter than the other. You see?"

"It is the kind you get on the train," said the doctor. "In paper covers."

Poirot was feeling in the pockets of Ratchett's clothing. Presently he pulled out a box of matches. He compared them carefully with the burnt ones. "The rounder one is a match struck by Mr. Ratchett," he said. "Let us see if he had also the flatter kind." But a further search showed no other matches.

Poirot's eyes were darting about the compartment. They were bright and sharp like a bird's. One felt that nothing could escape their scrutiny. With a little exclamation he bent and picked-up something from the floor. It was a small square of cambric, very dainty. In the corner was an embroidered initial - H.

"A woman's handkerchief," said the doctor. "Our friend the chef de train was right. There is a woman concerned in this."

"And most conveniently she leaves her handkerchief behind!" said Poirot. "Exactly as it happens in the books and on the films - and to make things even easier for us, it is marked with an initial."

"What a stroke of luck for us!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Is it not?" said Poirot. Something in his tone surprised the doctor, but before he could ask for elucidation Poirot had made another dive onto the floor. This time he held out on the palm of his hand - a pipe-cleaner.

"It is perhaps the property of Mr. Ratchett?" suggested the doctor.

"There was no pipe in any of his pockets, and no tobacco or tobacco pouch."

"Then it is a clue."

"Oh! decidedly. And again dropped most conveniently. A masculine clue, this time, you note! One cannot complain of having no clues in this case. There are clues here in abundance. By the way, what have you done with the weapon?"

"There was no sign of any weapon. The murderer must have taken it away with him."

"I wonder why," mused Poirot.

"Ah!" The doctor had been delicately exploring the pyjama pockets of the dead man. "I overlooked this," he said. "I unbuttoned the jacket and threw it straight back." From the breast pocket he brought out a gold watch. The case was dented savagely, and the hands pointed to a quarter past one. "You see?" cried Constantine eagerly. "This gives us the hour of the crime. It agrees with my calculations. Between midnight and two in the morning is what I said, and probably about one o'clock, though it is difficult to be exact in these matters. Eh bien, here is confirmation. A quarter past one. That was the hour of the crime."

"It is possible, yes. It is certainly possible."

The doctor looked at him curiously. "You will pardon me, M. Poirot, but I do not quite understand you."

"I do not understand myself," said Poirot. "I understand nothing at all. And, as you perceive, it worries me." He sighed and bent over the little table examining the charred fragment of paper. He murmured to himself, "What I need at this moment is an old-fashioned woman's hat-box."

Dr. Constantine was at a loss to know what to make of this singular remark. In any case Poirot gave him no time for questions. Opening the door into the corridor, he called for the conductor. The man arrived at a run. "How many women are there in this coach?"

The conductor counted on his fingers. "One, two, three - six, Monsieur. The old American lady, a Swedish lady, the young English lady, the Countess Andrenyi, and Madame la Princesse Dragomiroff and her maid."

Poirot considered. "They all have hat-boxes, yes?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Then bring me - let me see - yes, the Swedish lady's and that of the lady's-maid. Those two are the only hope. You will tell them it is a customs regulation - something - anything that occurs to you."

"That will be all right, Monsieur. Neither lady is in her compartment at the moment."

"Then be quick." The conductor departed. He returned with the two hatboxes. Poirot opened that of the maid, and tossed it aside. Then he opened the Swedish lady's and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Removing the hats carefully, he disclosed round humps of wire-netting. "Ah, here is what we need! About fifteen years ago hat-boxes were made like this. You skewered through the hat with a hatpin on to this hump of wire-netting." As he spoke he was skillfully removing two of the attached humps. Then he repacked the hat-box and told the conductor to return both boxes where they belonged. When the door was shut once more he turned to his companion.

"See you, my dear doctor, me, I am not one to rely upon the expert procedure. It is the psychology I seek, not the fingerprint or the cigarette ash. But in this case I would welcome a little scientific assistance. This compartment is full of clues, but can I be sure that those clues are really what they seem to be?"

"I do not quite understand you, M. Poirot."

"Well, to give you an example - we find a woman's handkerchief. Did a woman drop it? Or did a man, committing the crime, say to himself: 'I will make this look like a woman's crime. I will stab my enemy an unnecessary number of times, making some of the blows feeble and ineffective, and I will drop this handkerchief where no one can miss it'? That is one possibility. Then there is another. Did a woman kill him, and did she deliberately drop a pipe-cleaner to make it look like a man's work? Or are we seriously to suppose that two people, a man and a woman, were separately concerned, and that each was so careless as to drop a clue to his or her identity? It is a little too much of a coincidence, that!"

"But where does the hat-box come in?" asked the doctor, still puzzled.

"Ah! I am coming to that. As I say, these clues - the watch stopped at a quarter past one, the handkerchief, the pipe-cleaner - they may be genuine, or they may be faked. As to that I cannot yet tell. But there is one clue here which - though again I may be wrong - I believe has not been faked. I mean this flat match, M. le docteur. I believe that that match was used by the murderer, not by Mr. Ratchett. It was used to burn an incriminating paper of some kind. Possibly a note. If so, there was something in that note, some mistake, some error, that left a possible clue to the assailant. I am going to try to discover what that something was."

He went out of the compartment and returned a few moments later with a small spirit stove and a pair of curling-tongs. "I use them for the moustaches," he said, referring to the latter.

The doctor watched him with great interest. Poirot flattened out the two humps of wire, and with great care wriggled the charred scrap of paper on to one of them. He clapped the other on top of it and then, holding both pieces together with the tongs, held the whole thing over the flame of the spirit-lamp. "It is a very makeshift affair, this," he said over his shoulder. "Let us hope that it will answer our purpose."

The doctor watched the proceedings attentively. The metal began to glow. Suddenly he saw faint indications of letters. Words formed themselves slowly - words of fire. It was a very tiny scrap. Only three words and part of another showed.

-member little Daisy Armstrong

"Ah!" Poirot gave a sharp exclamation.

"It tells you something?" asked the doctor.

Poirot's eyes were shining. He laid down the tongs carefully. "Yes," he said. "I know the dead man's real name. I know why he had to leave America."

"What was his name?"

"Cassetti."

"Cassetti?" Constantine knitted his brows. "It brings back to me something. Some years ago. I cannot remember... It was a case in America, was it not?"

"Yes," said Poirot. "A case in America." Further than that Poirot was not disposed to be communicative. He looked round him as he went on: "We will go into all that presently. Let us first make sure that we have seen all

there is to be seen here.” Quickly and deftly he went once more through the pockets of the dead man’s clothes but found nothing there of interest. He tried the communicating door which led through to the next compartment, but it was bolted on the other side.

“There is one thing that I do not understand,” said Dr. Constantine. “If the murderer did not escape through the window, and if this communicating door was bolted on the other side, and if the door into the corridor was not only locked on the inside but chained, how then did the murderer leave the compartment?”

“That is what the audience says when a person bound hand and foot is shut into a cabinet - and disappears.”

“You mean-?”

“I mean,” explained Poirot, “that if the murderer intended us to believe that he had escaped by way of the window, he would naturally make it appear that the other two exits were impossible. Like the ‘disappearing person’ in the cabinet, it is a trick. It is our business to find out how the trick is done. He locked the communicating door on their side - “in case,” he said, “the excellent Mrs. Hubbard should take it into her head to acquire first-hand details of the crime to write to her daughter.” He looked round once more. “There is nothing more to do here, I think. Let us rejoin M. Bouc.”

8. The Armstrong Kidnapping Case

They found M. Bouc finishing an omelet.

“I thought it best to have lunch served immediately in the restaurant car,” he said. “Afterwards it will be cleared and M. Poirot can conduct his examination of the passengers there. In the meantime I have ordered them to bring us three some food here.”

“An excellent idea,” said Poirot. None of the three men was hungry, and the meal was soon eaten; but not till they were sipping their coffee did M. Bouc mention the subject that was occupying all their minds. .

“Eh bien ?” he asked.

“Eh bien, I have discovered the identity of the victim. I know why it was imperative he should leave America.”

“Who was he?”

"Do you remember reading of the Armstrong baby? This is the man who murdered little Daisy Armstrong. Cassetti."

"I recall it now. A shocking affair - though I cannot remember the details."

"Colonel Armstrong was an Englishman - a V.C. He was half American, his mother having been a daughter of W. K. Van der Halt, the Wall Street millionaire. He married the daughter of Linda Arden, the most famous tragic American actress of her day. They lived in America and had one child - a girl whom they idolized. When she was three years old she was kidnapped, and an impossibly high sum demanded as the price of her return. I will not weary you with all the intricacies that followed. I will come to the moment when, after the parents had paid over the enormous sum of two hundred thousand dollars, the child's dead body was discovered; it had been dead for at least a fortnight. Public indignation rose to fever point. And there was worse to follow. Mrs. Armstrong was expecting another baby. Following the shock of the discovery, she gave birth prematurely to a dead child, and herself died. Her broken-hearted husband shot himself."

"Mon Dieu, what a tragedy. I remember now," said M. Bouc. "There was also another death, if I remember rightly?"

"Yes, an unfortunate French or Swiss nursemaid. The police were convinced that she had some knowledge of the crime. They refused to believe her hysterical denials. Finally, in a fit of despair the poor girl threw herself from a window and was killed. It was proved afterwards that she had been absolutely innocent of any complicity in the crime."

"It is not good to think of," said M. Bouc.

"About six months later, this man Cassetti was arrested as the head of the gang who had kidnapped the child. They had used the same methods in the past. If the police seemed likely to get on their trail, they killed their prisoner, hid the body, and continued to extract as much money as possible before the crime was discovered. "Now, I will make clear to you this, my friend. Cassetti was the man! But by means of the enormous wealth he had piled up, and owing to the secret hold he had over various persons, he was acquitted on some technical inaccuracy. Notwithstanding that, he would have been lynched by the populace had he not been clever enough to give them the slip. It is now clear to me what happened. He changed his name and left America. Since then he has been a gentleman of leisure, travelling abroad and living on his rentes."

“Ah! quel animal !” M. Bouc’s tone was redolent of heartfelt disgust. “I cannot regret that he is dead - not at all!”

“I agree with you.”

“Tout de meme, it is not necessary that he should be killed on the Orient Express. There are other places.”

Poirot smiled a little. He realised that M. Bouc was biased in the matter. “The question we have now to ask ourselves is this,” he said. “Is this murder the work of some rival gang whom Casseti had double-crossed in the past, or is it an act of private vengeance?” He explained his discovery of the few words on the charred fragment of paper. “If I am right in my assumption, then, the letter was burnt by the murderer. Why? Because it mentioned the name ‘Armstrong/ which is the clue to the mystery.”

“Are there any members of the Armstrong family living?”

“That, unfortunately, I do not know. I think I remember reading of a younger sister of Mrs. Armstrong’s.” Poirot went on to relate the joint conclusions of himself and Dr. Constantine.

M. Bouc brightened at the mention of the broken watch. “That seems to give us the time of the crime very exactly.”

“Yes,” said Poirot. “It is very convenient.” There was an indescribable something in his tone that made both the other two look at him curiously.

“You say that you yourself heard Ratchett speak to the conductor at twenty minutes to one?” asked M. Bouc.

Poirot related just what had occurred.

“Well,” said M. Bouc, “that proves at least that Casseti - or Ratchett, as I shall continue to call him - was certainly alive at twenty minutes to one.”

“Twenty-three minutes to one, to be precise.”

Then at twelve thirty-seven, to put it formally, Mr. Ratchett was alive. That is one fact, at least.” Poirot did not reply. He sat looking thoughtfully in front of him. There was a tap on the door and the restaurant attendant entered.

“The restaurant car is free now, Monsieur,” he said.

“We will go there,” said M. Bouc, rising.

“I may accompany you?” asked Constantine.

“Certainly, my dear doctor. Unless M. Poirot has any objection?”

“Not at all. Not at all,” said Poirot. After a little politeness in the matter of

precedence - "Après vous, Monsieur " -
they left the compartment.

- "Mais non, après vous" -

Part II. The Evidence

1. The Evidence of the Wagon Lit Conductor

In the restaurant car all was in readiness. Poirot and M. Bouc sat together on one side of a table. The doctor sat across the aisle. On the table in front of Poirot was a plan of the Istanbul-Calais coach with the names of the passengers marked in red ink. The passports and tickets were in a pile at one side. There was writing paper, ink, pen, and pencils. "Excellent," said Poirot. "We can open our Court of Inquiry without more ado. First, I think, we should take the evidence of the Wagon Lit conductor. You probably know something about the man. What character has he? Is he a man on whose word you would place reliance?"

"I should say so, most assuredly. Pierre Michel has been employed by the company for over fifteen years. He is a Frenchman - lives near Calais. Thoroughly respectable and honest. Not, perhaps, remarkable for brains."

Poirot nodded comprehendingly. "Good," he said. "Let us see him."

Pierre Michel had recovered some of his assurance, but he was still extremely nervous. "I hope Monsieur will not think that there has been any negligence on my part," he said anxiously, his eyes going from Poirot to M. Bouc. "It is a terrible thing that has happened. I hope Monsieur does not think that it reflects on me in any way?"

Having soothed the man's fears, Poirot began his questions. He first elicited Michel's name and address, his length of service, and the length of time he had been on this particular route. These particulars he already knew, but the routine questions served to put the man at his ease.

"And now," went on Poirot, "let us come to the events of Last night. M. Ratchett retired to bed - when?"

"Almost immediately after dinner, Monsieur. Actually before we left Belgrade. So he did on the previous night. He had directed me to make up the bed while he was at dinner, and I did so."

"Did anybody go into his compartment afterwards?"

"His valet, Monsieur, and the young American gentleman, his secretary."

"Anyone else?"

"No, Monsieur, not that I know of."

"Good. And that is the last you saw or heard of him?"

"No, Monsieur. You forget he rang his bell about twenty to one - soon after we had stopped."

"What happened exactly?"

"I knocked at the door, but he called out and said he had made a mistake."

"In English or in French?"

"In French."

"What were his words exactly?"

"Ce n'est rien. Je me suis trompé."

"Quite right," said Poirot. "That is what I heard. And then you went away?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Did you go back to your seat?"

"No, Monsieur, I went first to answer another bell that had just rung."

"Now, Michel, I am going to ask you an important question. Where were you at a quarter past one?"

"I, Monsieur? I was at my little seat at the end - facing up the corridor."

"You are sure?"

"Mais oui - at least-" "I went into the next coach, the Athens coach, to speak to my colleague there. We spoke about the snow. That was at some time soon after one o'clock. I cannot say exactly."

"And you returned - when?"

"One of my bells rang, Monsieur - I remember - I told you. It was the American lady. She had rung several times."

"I recollect," said Poirot. "And after that?"

"After that, Monsieur? I answered your bell and brought you some mineral water. Then, about half an hour later, I made up the bed in one of the other compartments - that of the young American gentleman, Mr. Ratchett's secretary."

"Was Mr. MacQueen alone in his compartment when you went to make up his bed?"

"The English Colonel from No. 15 was with him. They had been sitting talking."

"What did the Colonel do when he left Mr. MacQueen?"

"He went back to his own compartment."

"No. 15 - that is quite close to your seat, is it not?"

"Yes, Monsieur, it is the second compartment from that end of the corridor."

"His bed was already made up?"

"Yes, Monsieur. I had made it up while he was at dinner."

"What time was all this?"

"I could not say exactly, Monsieur. Not later than two o'clock certainly."

"And after that?"

"After that, Monsieur, I sat in my seat till morning."

"You did not go again into the Athens coach?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Perhaps you slept?"

"I do not think so, Monsieur. The train being at a standstill prevented me from dozing off as I usually do."

"Did you see any of the passengers moving up or down the corridor?"

The man reflected. "One of the ladies went to the toilet at the far end, I think."

"Which lady?"

"I do not know, Monsieur. It was far down the corridor and she had her back to me. She had on a kimono of scarlet with dragons on it."

Poirot nodded. "And after that?"

"Nothing, Monsieur, until the morning."

"You are sure?"

"Ah, pardon - you yourself, Monsieur, opened your door and looked out for a second."

"Good, my friend," said Poirot. "I wondered whether you would remember that. By the way, I was awakened by what sounded like something heavy falling against my door. Have you any idea what that could have been?"

The man stared at him. "There was nothing, Monsieur. Nothing, I am positive of it."

"Then I must have had the cauchemar," said Poirot philosophically.

"Unless," put in M. Bouc, "it was something in the compartment next door that you heard."

Poirot took no notice of the suggestion. Perhaps he did not wish to before the Wagon Lit conductor. "Let us pass to another point," he said.

"Supposing that last night an assassin joined the train. Is it quite certain that he could not have left it after committing the crime?"

Pierre Michel shook his head. "Nor that he can be concealed on it somewhere?"

"It has been well searched," said M. Bouc. "Abandon that idea, my friend." "Besides," said Michel, "no one could get on to the sleeping-car without my seeing them."

"When was the last stop?"

"Vincovci."

"What time was that?"

"We should have left there at 11:58, but owing to the weather we were twenty minutes late."

"Someone might have come along from the ordinary part of the train?"

"No, Monsieur. After the service of dinner, the door between the ordinary carriages and the sleeping-cars is locked."

"Did you yourself descend from the train at Vincovci?"

"Yes, Monsieur. I got down onto the platform as usual and stood by the step up into the train. The other conductors did the same."

"What about the forward door - the one near the restaurant car?"

"It is always fastened on the inside."

"It is not so fastened now."

The man looked surprised; then his face cleared. "Doubtless one of the passengers opened it to look out on the snow."

"Probably," said Poirot. He tapped thoughtfully on the table for a minute or two.

"Monsieur does not blame me?" said the man timidly.

Poirot smiled on him kindly. "You have had the evil chance, my friend," he said. "Ah! one other point while I remember it. You said that another bell rang just as you were knocking at M. Ratchett's door. In fact I heard it myself. Whose was it?"

"It was the bell of Madame la Princesse Dragomiroff. She desired me to summon her maid."

"And you did so?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

Poirot studied the plan in front of him thoughtfully. Then he inclined his head. "That is all," he said, "for the moment."

"Thank you, Monsieur."

The man rose. He looked at M. Bouc.

“Do not distress yourself,” said the latter kindly; “I cannot see that there has been any negligence on your part.”
Gratified, Pierre Michel left the compartment.

2. The Evidence of the Secretary

For a minute or two Poirot remained lost, in thought.

“I think,” he said at last, “that it would be well to have a further word with Mr. MacQueen, in view of what we now know.”

The young American appeared promptly.

“Well,” he said, “how are things going?”

“Not too badly. Since our last conversation, I have learnt something - the identity of Mr. Ratchett.”

Hector MacQueen leaned forward interestedly. “Yes?” he said.

“ ‘Ratchett,’ as you suspected, was merely an alias. The man ‘Ratchett’ was Cassetti, who ran the celebrated kidnapping stunts - including the famous affair of little Daisy Armstrong.”

An expression of utter astonishment appeared on MacQueen’s face. Then it darkened. “The damned skunk!” he exclaimed.

“You had no idea of this, Mr. MacQueen?”

“No, sir,” said the young American decidedly. “If I had, I’d have cut off my right hand before it had a chance to do secretarial work for him!”

“You feel strongly about the matter, Mr. MacQueen?”

"I have a particular reason for doing so. My father was the district attorney who handled the case, Mr. Poirot. I saw Mrs. Armstrong more than once - she was a lovely woman. So gentle and heartbroken." His face darkened. "If ever a man deserved what he got, Ratchett - or Cassetti - is the man. I'm rejoiced at his end. Such a man wasn't fit to live!"

"You almost feel as though you would have been willing to do the good deed yourself?"

"I do. I-" He paused, then added rather guiltily, "Seems I'm kind of incriminating myself."

"I should be more inclined to suspect you, Mr. MacQueen, if you displayed an inordinate sorrow at your employer's decease."

"I don't think I could do that even to save myself from the chair," said MacQueen grimly. Then he added: "If I'm not being unduly curious, just how did you figure this out? Cassetti's identity, I mean."

"By a fragment of a letter found in his compartment."

"But surely - I mean - that was rather careless of the old man?"

"That depends," said Poirot, "on the point of view."

The young man seemed to find this remark rather baffling. He stared at Poirot as though trying to make him out.

"The task before me," said Poirot, "is to make sure of the movements of every one on the train. No offence need be taken, you understand. It is only a matter of routine."

"Sure. Get right on with it and let me clear my character if I can."

"I need hardly ask you the number of your compartment," said Poirot, smiling, "since I shared it with you for a night. It is the second-class compartment Nos. 6 and 7, and after my departure you had it to yourself."

"That's right."

"Now, Mr. MacQueen, I want you to describe your movements last night from the time of leaving the dining-car."

"That's quite easy. I went back to my compartment, read a bit, got out on the platform at Belgrade, decided it was too cold, and got in again. I talked for a while to a young English lady who is in the compartment next to mine. Then I fell into conversation with that Englishman, Colonel Arbuthnot - as a matter of fact I think you passed us as we were talking. Then I went in to Mr.

Ratchett and, as I told you, took down some memoranda of letters he wanted written. I said good night to him and left him. Colonel Arbuthnot was still standing in the corridor. His compartment was already made up for the night, so I suggested that he should come along to mine. I ordered a couple of drinks and we got right down to it. Discussed world politics and the Government of India and our own troubles with Prohibition and the Wall Street crisis. I don't as a rule cotton to Britishers - they're a stiff-necked lot - but I liked this one."

"Do you know what time it was when he left you?"

"Pretty late. Nearly two o'clock, I should say."

"You noticed that the train had stopped?"

"Oh, yes. We wondered a bit. Looked out and saw the snow lying very thick, but we didn't think it was serious."

"What happened when Colonel Arbuthnot finally said good night?"

"He went along to his compartment and I called to the conductor to make up my bed."

"Where were you whilst he was making it?"

"Standing just outside the door in the corridor smoking a cigarette."

"And then?"

"And then I went to bed and slept till morning."

"During the evening did you leave the train at all?"

"Arbuthnot and I thought we'd get out at - what was the name of the place? - Vincovci - to stretch our legs a bit. But it was bitterly cold - a blizzard on. We soon hopped back again."

"By which door did you leave the train?"

"By the one nearest to our compartment."

"The one next to the dining-car?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember if it was bolted?"

MacQueen considered. "Why, yes, I seem to remember it was. At least there was a kind of bar that fitted across the handle. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. On getting back into the train did you replace that bar?"

"Why, no - I don't think I did. I got in last. No, I don't seem to remember doing so." He added suddenly, "Is that an important point?"

"It may be. Now, I presume, Monsieur, that while you and Colonel Arbuthnot were sitting talking the door of your compartment into the corridor was open?"

Hector MacQueen nodded.

"I want you, if you can, to tell me if anyone passed along that corridor after the train left Vincovci up to the time you parted company for the night."

MacQueen drew his brows together. "I think the conductor passed along once," he said, "coming from the direction of the dining-car. And a woman passed the other way, going towards it."

"Which woman?"

"I couldn't say. I didn't really notice. You see I was arguing a point with Arbuthnot. I just seem to remember a glimpse of some scarlet silk affair passing the door. I didn't look, and anyway I wouldn't have seen the person's face. As you know, my carriage faces the dining-car end of the train, so a woman going along the corridor in that direction would have her back to me as soon as she'd passed."

Poirot nodded. "She was going to the toilet, I presume?"

"I suppose so."

"And you saw her return?"

"Well, no, now that you mention it, I didn't notice her returning but I suppose she must have done so."

"One more question. Do you smoke a pipe, Mr. MacQueen?"

"No, sir, I do not."

Poirot paused a moment. "I think that is all at present. I should now like to see the valet of Mr. Ratchett. By the way, did both you and he always travel second-class?"

"He did. But I usually went first - if possible in the compartment adjoining Mr. Ratchett's. Then he had most of his baggage put in my compartment and yet could get at both it and me easily whenever he chose. But on this occasion all the first-class berths were booked except the one that he took."

"I comprehend. Thank you, Mr. MacQueen."

3. The Evidence of the Valet

The American was succeeded by the pale Englishman with the inexpressive face whom Poirot had already noticed on the day before. He stood waiting very correctly. Poirot motioned to him to sit down.

"You are, I understand, the valet of M. Ratchett."

"Yes, sir."

"Your name?"

"Edward Henry Masterman."

"Your age?"

"Thirty-nine."

"And your home address?"

"21 Friar Street, Clerkenwell."

"You have heard that your master has been murdered?"

"Yes, sir. A very shocking occurrence."

"Will you now tell me, please, at what hour you last saw M. Ratchett?"

The valet considered. "It must have been about nine o'clock, sir, last night. That or a little after."

"Tell me in your own words exactly what happened."

"I went in to Mr. Ratchett as usual, sir, and attended to his wants."

"What were your duties exactly?"

"To fold or hang up his clothes, sir, put his dental plate in water and see that he had everything he wanted for the night."

"Was his manner much the same as usual?"

The valet considered a moment. "Well, sir, I think he was upset."

"In what way - upset?"

"Over a letter he'd been reading. He asked me if it his compartment. Of course I told him I hadn't done so and he swore at me and found fault with everything I did."

"Was that unusual?"

"Oh, no, sir. He lost his temper easily - as I say, it happened to upset him."

"Did your master ever take a sleeping draught?"

Dr. Constantine leaned forward a little.

"Always when travelling by train, sir. He said he couldn't sleep otherwise."

"Do you know what drug he was in the habit of taking?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir. There was no name on the bottle - just 'The Sleeping Draught to be taken at bedtime .' "

"Did he take it last night?"

"Yes, sir. I poured it into a glass and put it on top of the toilet table ready for him."

"You didn't actually see him drink it?"

"No, sir."

"What happened next?"

"I asked if there was anything further, and also asked what time he would like to be called in the morning. He said he didn't want to be disturbed till he rang."

"Was that usual?"

"Quite usual, sir. When he was ready to get up he used to ring the bell for the conductor and then send him for me."

"Was he usually an early or a late riser?"

"It depended, sir, on his mood. Sometimes he'd get up for breakfast, sometimes he wouldn't get up till just on lunch time."

"So that you weren't alarmed when the morning wore on and no summons came?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know that your master had enemies?"

"Yes, sir." The man spoke quite unemotionally.

"How did you know?"

"I had heard him discussing some letters, sir, with Mr. MacQueen."

"Had you an affection for your employer, Masterman?"

Masterman's face became, if possible, even more inexpressive than it was normally.

"I should hardly like to say that, sir. He was a generous employer."

"But you didn't like him?"

"Shall we put it that I don't care very much for Americans, sir?"

"Have you ever been in America?"

"No, sir."

"Do you remember reading in the paper of the Armstrong kidnapping case?"

A little colour came into the man's cheeks. "Yes, indeed, sir. A little baby girl, wasn't it? A very shocking affair."

"Did you know that your employer, Mr. Ratchett, was the principal instigator in that affair?"

"No, indeed, sir." The valet's tone held positive warmth and feeling for the first time. "I can hardly believe it, sir."

"Nevertheless, it is true. Now, to pass to your own movements last night. A matter of routine, you understand. What did you do after leaving your master?"

"I told Mr. MacQueen, sir, that the master wanted him. Then I went to my own compartment and read."

"Your compartment was-"

"The end second-class one, sir. Next to the dining-car."

Poirot was looking at his plan. "I see - and you had which berth?"

"The lower one, sir."

"That is No. 4?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there anyone in with you?"

"Yes, sir. A big Italian fellow."

"Does he speak English?"

"Well, a kind of English, sir." The valet's tone was deprecating. "He's been in America - Chicago, I understand."

"Do you and he talk together much?"

"No, sir. I prefer to read."

Poirot smiled. He could visualize the scene - the large, voluble Italian, and the snub direct administered by the gentleman's gentleman.

"And what, may I ask, are you reading?" he inquired.

"At present, sir, I am reading Love's Captive, by Mrs. Arabella Richardson." "A good story?"

"I find it highly enjoyable, sir."

"Well, let us continue. You returned to your compartment and read Love's Captive till - when?"

"At about ten thirty, sir, this Italian wanted to go to bed. So the conductor came and made the beds up."

"And then you went to bed and to sleep?"

"I went to bed, sir, but I didn't sleep."

"Why didn't you sleep?"

"I had the toothache, sir."

"Oh, la-la - that is painful."

"Most painful, sir."

"Did you do anything for it?"

"I applied a little oil of cloves, sir, which relieved the pain a little, but I was still not able to get to sleep. I turned the light on above my head and continued to read - to take my mind off, as it were."

"And did you not go to sleep at all?"

"Yes, sir, I dropped off about four in the morning."

"And your companion?"

"The Italian fellow? Oh, he just snored."

"He did not leave the compartment at all during the night?"

"No, sir."

"Did you?"

"No, sir."

"Did you hear anything during the night?"

"I don't think so, sir. Nothing unusual, I mean. The train being at a standstill made it all very quiet."

Poirot was silent a moment or two. Then he spoke. "Well, I think there is very little more to be said. You cannot throw any light upon the tragedy?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm sorry, sir."

"As far as you know, was there any quarrel or bad blood between your master and Mr. MacQueen?"

"Oh! no, sir. Mr. MacQueen was a very pleasant gentleman."

"Where were you in service before you came to Mr. Ratchett?"

"With Sir Henry Tomlinson, sir, in Grosvenor Square."

"Why did you leave him?"

"He was going to East Africa, sir, and did not require my services any longer. But I am sure he will speak for me, sir. I was with him some years."

"And you have been with Mr. Ratchett - how long?"

"Just over nine months, sir."

"Thank you, Masterman. By the way, are you a pipe-smoker?"

"No, sir. I only smoke cigarettes - gaspers, sir."

"Thank you, that will do."

Poirot gave him a nod of dismissal.

The valet hesitated a moment.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but the elderly American lady is in what I might describe as a state, sir. She's saying she knows ah about the murderer. She's in a very excitable condition, sir."

"In that case," said Poirot, smiling, "we had better see her next."

"Shall I tell her, sir? She's been demanding to see someone in authority for a long time. The conductor's been trying to pacify her."

"Send her to us, my friend," said Poirot. "We will listen to her story now."

4. The Evidence of the American Lady

Mrs. Hubbard arrived in the dining-car in such a state of breathless gexcitement that she was hardly able to articulate her words. "Now just tell me this - who's in authority here? I've got some very important information, very important indeed, and I'm going to tell it to someone in authority just as soon as I can. If you gentlemen-"

Her wavering glance fluctuated between the three men. Poirot leaned forward.

"Tell it to me, Madame," he said. "But first, pray be seated."

Mrs. Hubbard plumped heavily down on to the seat opposite to him.

"What I've got to tell you is just this. There was a murder on the train last night, and the murderer was right there in my compartment !"

She paused to give dramatic emphasis to her words.

"You are sure of this, Madame?"

"Of course I'm sure! The idea! I know what I'm talking about. I'll tell you everything there is to tell. I'd gotten into bed and gone to sleep, and suddenly I woke up - everything was dark - and I knew there was a man in my compartment. I was just so scared I couldn't scream, if you know what I mean. I just lay there and thought, 'Mercy, I'm going to be killed!' I just can't describe to you how I felt. These nasty trains, I thought, and all the outrages I'd read of. And I thought, 'Well, anyway, he won't get my jewellery' - because, you see, I'd put that in a stocking and hidden it under my pillow - which isn't any too comfortable, by the way; kinda bumpy, if you know what I mean. But that's neither here nor there. Where was I?"

"You realised, Madame, that there was a man in your compartment."

"Yes, well, I just lay there with my eyes closed, and wondered what I'd do. And I thought, well, I'm just thankful that my daughter doesn't know the plight I'm in. And then, somehow, I got my wits about me and I felt about with my hand and I pressed the bell for the conductor. I pressed it and I pressed it, but nothing happened - and I can tell you, I thought my heart was going to stop beating. 'Mercy,' I said to myself, 'maybe they've murdered every single soul on the train.' It was at a standstill anyhow and there was a nasty quiet feel in the air. But I just went on pressing that bell and oh! the relief when I heard footsteps coming running down the corridor

and a knock on the door! 'Come in,' I screamed, and I switched on the lights at the same time. And would you believe it, there wasn't a soul there!"

This seemed to Mrs. Hubbard to be a dramatic climax rather than an anticlimax.

"And what happened next, Madame?"

"Why, I told the man what had happened and he didn't seem to believe me. Seemed to imagine I'd dreamed the whole thing. I made him look under the seat, though he said there wasn't room for a man to squeeze himself in there. It was plain enough that the man had got away - but there had been a man there, and it just made me mad the way the conductor tried to soothe me down! I'm not one to imagine things, Mr. - I don't think I know your name?"

"Poirot, Madame; and this is M. Bouc, a director of the company, and Dr. Constantine."

Mrs. Hubbard murmured, "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," to all three of them in an abstracted manner and then plunged once more into her recital. "Now I'm just not going to pretend I was as bright as I might have been. I got it into my head that it was the man from next door - the poor fellow who's been killed. I told the conductor to look at the door between the compartments, and sure enough it wasn't bolted. Well, I soon saw to that. I told him to bolt it then and there, and after he'd gone out I got up and put a suitcase against it to make sure."

"What time was this, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"Well, I'm sure I can't tell you. I never looked to see. I was so upset."

"And what is your theory now?"

"Why, I should say it was just as plain as plain could be. The man in my compartment was the murderer. Who else could he be?"

"And you think he went back into the adjoining compartment?"

"How do I know where he went? I had my eyes tight shut."

"He might have slipped out through the door into the corridor."

"Well, I couldn't say. You see, I had my eyes tight shut." Mrs. Hubbard sighed convulsively. "Mercy, I was scared! If my daughter only knew

"You do not think, Madame, that what you heard was the noise of someone moving about next door - in the murdered man's compartment?"

"No, I do not, Mr. - what is it? - Poirot. The man was right there in the same compartment with me. And what's more I've got proof of it."

Triumphantly, she hauled a large handbag into view and proceeded to burrow in its interior. She took out in turn two large clean handkerchiefs, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, a bottle of aspirin, a packet of Glauber's Salts, a celluloid tube of bright green peppermints, a bunch of keys, a pair of scissors, a book of American Express cheques, a snapshot of an extraordinarily plain-looking child, some letters, five strings of pseudo-Oriental beads, and a small metal object - a button.

"You see this button? Well, it's not one of my buttons. It's not off anything I've got. I found it this morning when I got up."

As she placed it on the table, M. Bouc. leaned forward and gave an exclamation. "But this is a button from the tunic of a Wagon Lit attendant!"

"There may be a natural explanation for that," said Poirot. He turned gently to the lady. "This button, Madame, may have dropped from the conductor's uniform, either when he searched your cabin or when he was making the bed up last night."

"I just don't know what's the matter with all you people. Seems as though you don't want to do anything but make objections. Now listen here. I was reading a magazine last night before I went to sleep. Before I turned the light out, I placed that magazine on a little case that was standing on the floor near the window. Have you got that?"

They assured her that they had.

"Very well then. The conductor looked under the seat from near the door, and then he came in and bolted the door between me and the next compartment, but he never went near the window. Well, this morning that button was lying right on top of the magazine. What do you call that, I should like to know?"

"That, Madame, I call evidence," said Poirot.

The answer seemed to appease the lady. "It makes me madder than a hornet to be disbelieved," she explained.

"You have given us most interesting and valuable evidence," said Poirot soothingly. "Now may I ask you a few questions?"

"Why, certainly."

"How was it, since you were nervous of this man Ratchett, that you hadn't already bolted the door between the compartments?"

"I had," returned Mrs. Hubbard promptly.

"Oh, you had?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I asked that Swedish creature - a pleasant soul - if it was bolted, and she said it was."

"How was it you couldn't see for yourself?"

"Because I was in bed and my spongebag was hanging on the door-handle."

"What time was it when you asked her to do this for you?"

"Now let me think. It must have been round about half-past ten or a quarter to eleven. She'd come along to see if I had an aspirin. I told her where to find it and she got it out of my grip."

"You yourself were in bed?"

"Yes."

Suddenly she laughed. "Poor soul - she was so upset! You see, she'd opened the door of the next compartment by mistake."

"Mr. Ratchett's?"

"Yes. You know how difficult it is as you come along the train and all the doors are shut. She opened his by mistake. She was very distressed about it. He'd laughed, it seemed, and I guess he said something not quite nice. Poor thing, she certainly was upset. 'Oh! I make mistake,' she said. 'I am ashamed make mistake. Not nice man,' she said. 'He say, "You too old." ' "

Dr. Constantine sniggered, and Mrs. Hubbard immediately froze him with a glance.

"He wasn't a nice kind of man," she said, "to say a thing like that to a lady. It's not right to laugh at such things." Dr. Constantine hastily apologised.

"Did you hear any noise from Mr. Ratchett's compartment after that?" asked Poirot.

"Well - not exactly."

"What do you mean by that, Madame?"

"Well-" She paused. "He snored."

"Ah! - he snored, did he?"

"Terribly. The night before, it kept me awake."

"You didn't hear him snore after you had had the scare about a man being in your compartment?"

"Why, Mr. Poirot, how could I? He was dead."

Ah, Yes, truly," said Poirot. He appeared confused.

"Do you remember the affair of the Armstrong kidnapping, Mrs. Hubbard?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed I do. And how the wretch that did it escaped scot-free! My, I'd have liked to get my hands on him."

"He has not escaped. He is dead. He died last night."

"You don't mean-?" Mrs. Hubbard half rose from her chair in excitement.

"But yes, I do. Ratchett was the man."

"Weill Well, to think of that! I must write and tell my daughter. Now, didn't I tell you last night that that man had an evil face? I was right, you see. My daughter always says: 'When Mamma's got a hunch you can bet your bottom dollar it's O.K.'"

"Were you acquainted with any of the Armstrong family, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"No. They moved in a very exclusive circle. But I've always heard that Mrs. Armstrong was a perfectly lovely woman and that her husband worshipped her."

"Well, Mrs. Hubbard, you have helped us very much - very much indeed. Perhaps you will give me your full name?"

"Why, certainly. Caroline Martha Hubbard."

"Will you write your address down here?"

Mrs. Hubbard did so, without ceasing to speak. "I just can't get over it. Cassetti - on this train. I had a hunch about that man, didn't I, Mr. Poirot?"

"Yes, indeed, Madame. By the way, have you a scarlet silk dressing-gown?"

"Mercy, what a funny question! Why, no. I've got two dressing-gowns with me - a pink flannel one that's kind of cosy for on board ship, and one my daughter gave me as a present - a kind of local affair in purple silk. But what in creation do you want to know about my dressing-gowns for?"

"Well, you see, Madame, someone in a scarlet kimono entered either your or

Mr. Ratchett's compartment last night. It is, as you said just now, very difficult

when all the doors are shut to know which compartment is which."

"Well, no one in a scarlet dressing-gown came into my compartment."

"Then she must have gone into Mr. Ratchett's."

Mrs. Hubbard pursed her lips together and said grimly: "That wouldn't surprise me any."

Poirot leaned forward. "So you heard a woman's voice next door?"

"I don't know how you guessed that, Mr. Poirot. I don't really. But - well - as a matter of fact, I did."

“But when I asked you just now if you heard anything next door, you only said you heard Mr. Ratchett snoring.”

“Well, that was true enough. He did snore part of the time. As for the other-”

Mrs. Hubbard got rather embarrassed. “It isn’t a very nice thing to speak about.”

“What time was it when you heard a woman’s voice?”

“I can’t tell you. I just woke up for a minute and heard a woman talking, and it was plain enough where she was. So I just thought, ‘Well, that’s the kind of

man he is! I’m not surprised’ - and then I went to sleep again. And I’m sure I should never have mentioned anything of the kind to three strange gentlemen if you hadn’t dragged it out of me.”

“Was it before the scare about the man in your compartment, or after?”

“Why, that’s like what you said just now! He wouldn’t have had a woman talking to him if he were dead, would he?”

“Pardon. You must think me very stupid, Madame.”

“I guess even you get kinda muddled now and then. I just can’t get over its being that monster Cassetti. What my daughter will say-”

Poirot managed adroitly to help the good lady to replace the contents of her

handbag, and he then shepherded her towards the door.

At the last moment, he said:

“You have dropped your handkerchief, Madame.”

Mrs. Hubbard looked at the little scrap of cambric he held out to her.

“That’s not mine, Mr. Poirot. I’ve got mine right here.”

“Pardon. I thought as it had the initial H on it-”

“Well, now, that’s funny, but it’s certainly not mine. Mine are marked C.M.H., and they’re sensible things - not expensive Paris fallals. What good is a handkerchief like that to anybody’s nose?”

None of the three men seemed to have an answer to this question and Mrs. Hubbard sailed out triumphantly.

5. The Evidence of the Swedish Lady

M. Bouc was handling the button that Mrs. Hubbard had left behind her.

“This button. I cannot understand it. Does it mean that after all, Pierre Michel is involved in some way?” he asked. He paused, then continued, as Poirot did not reply. “What have you to say, my friend?”

“That button, it suggests possibilities,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “Let us interview next the Swedish lady before we discuss the evidence that we have heard.”

He sorted through the pile of passports in front of him. “Ah! here we are. Greta Ohlsson, age forty-nine.”

M. Bouc gave directions to the restaurant attendant, and presently the lady with the yellowish grey bun of hair and the long, mild, sheep-like face was ushered in. She peered short-sightedly at Poirot through her glasses, but was quite calm.

It transpired that she understood and spoke French, so the conversation took

place in that language. Poirot first asked her the questions to which he already

knew the answers - her name, age, and address. He then asked her her occupation.

She was, she told him, matron in a missionary school near Stamboul. She was a trained nurse.

“You know, of course, of what took place last night, Mademoiselle?”

“Naturally. It is very dreadful. And the American lady tells me that the murderer was actually in her compartment.”

“I hear, Mademoiselle, that you were the last person to see the murdered man
alive?”

“I do not know. It may be so. I opened the door of his compartment by mistake. I was much ashamed. It was a most awkward mistake.”

“You actually saw him?”

“Yes. He was reading a book. I apologised quickly and withdrew.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

A slight flush showed on the worthy lady’s cheek.

“He laughed and said a few words. I - I did not quite catch them.”

“And what did you do after that, Mademoiselle?” asked Poirot, passing from the subject tactfully.

“I went in to the American lady, Mrs. Hubbard. I asked her for some aspirin and she gave it to me.”

“Did she ask you whether the communicating door between her compartment and that of Mr. Ratchett was bolted?”

“Yes.”

“And was it?”

“Yes.”

“And after that?”

“After that I went back to my compartment, took the aspirin, and lay down.”

“What time was all this?”

“When I got into bed it was five minutes to eleven. I know because I looked at my watch before I wound it up.”

“Did you go to sleep quickly?”

“Not very quickly. My head got better, but I lay awake some time.”

“Had the train come to a stop before you went to sleep?”

“I do not think so. We stopped, I think, at a station just as I was getting

drowsy.”

“That would be Vincovci. Now your compartment, Mademoiselle, is this one?” He indicated it on the plan.

“That is so, yes.”

“You had the upper or the lower berth?”

“The lower berth, No. 10.”

“And you had a companion?”

“Yes, a young English lady. Very nice, very amiable. She had travelled from Baghdad.”

“After the train left Vincovci, did she leave the compartment?”

“No, I am sure she did not.”

“Why are you sure if you were asleep?”

“I sleep very lightly. I am used to waking at a sound. I am sure that if she had come down from the berth above I should have awakened.”

“Did you yourself leave the compartment?”

“Not until this morning.”

“Have you a scarlet silk kimono, Mademoiselle?”

“No, indeed. I have a good comfortable dressing-gown of Jaeger material.”

“And the lady with you, Miss Debenham? What colour is her dressing-gown?”

“A pale mauve aba such as you buy in the East.”

Poirot nodded. Then he asked in a friendly tone: “Why are you taking this journey? A holiday?”

“Yes, I am going home for a holiday. But first I am going to Lausanne to stay with a sister for a week or so.”

“Perhaps you will be so amiable as to write me down the name and address of your sister?”

“With pleasure.”

She took the paper and pencil he gave her and wrote down the name and address as requested.

“Have you ever been in America, Mademoiselle?”

“No. I very nearly went once. I was to go with an invalid lady, but the plan was cancelled at the last moment. I much regretted this. They are very good, the Americans. They give much money to found schools and hospitals. And they are very practical.”

“Do you remember hearing of the Armstrong kidnapping case?”

“No, what was that?”

Poirot explained.

Greta Ohlsson was indignant. Her yellow bun of hair quivered with her emotion.

“That there are in the world such evil men! It tries one’s faith. The poor mother - my heart aches for her.”

The amiable Swede departed, her kindly face flushed, her eyes suffused with tears.

Poirot was writing busily on a sheet of paper.

“What is it you write there, my friend?” asked M. Bouc.

“Mon cher, it is my habit to be neat and orderly. I make here a little

chronological table of events.”

He finished writing and passed the paper to M. Bouc.

9.15 Train leaves Belgrade.

about 9.40 Valet leaves Ratchett with sleeping draught beside him.

about 10.00 MacQueen leaves Ratchett.

about 10.40 Greta Ohlsson sees Ratchett (last seen alive). N.B. He was awake reading a book.

0.10 Train leaves Vincovci (late).

0.30 Train runs into a snowdrift.

0.37 Ratchett’s bell rings. Conductor answers it. Ratchett says: “Ce n’est rien. Je me suis trompe.”

about 1.17 Mrs. Hubbard thinks man is in her carriage. Rings for conductor.

M. Bouc nodded approval.

“That is very clear,” he said.

“There is nothing there that strikes you as at all odd?”

“No, it seems all quite clear and aboveboard. It seems quite plain that the crime was committed at 1.15. The evidence of the watch shows us that, and Mrs.

Hubbard’s story fits in. For my mind, I will make a guess at the identity of the

murderer. I say, my friend, that it is the big Italian. He comes from America - from Chicago - and remember an Italian’s weapon is the knife, and he stabs not

once but several times.”

“That is true.”

“Without a doubt, that is the solution of the mystery. Doubtless he and this Ratchett were in this kidnapping business together. Cassetti is an Italian name. In

some way Ratchett did on him what they call the double-cross. The Italian tracks

him down, sends him warning letters first, and finally revenges himself upon him in a brutal way. It is all quite simple.”

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

“It is hardly so simple as that, I fear,” he murmured.

“Me, I am convinced it is the truth,” said M. Bouc, becoming more and more enamoured of his theory.

“And what about the valet with the toothache who swears that the Italian never left the compartment?”

“That is the difficulty.”

Poirot twinkled.

“Yes, it is annoying, that. Unlucky for your theory, and extremely lucky for our Italian friend that M. Ratchett’s valet should have had the toothache.”

“It will be explained,” said M. Bouc with magnificent certainty.

Poirot shook his head again.

“No, it is hardly so simple as that,” he murmured again.